Governing Change
Keating to Howard

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Governed Change: 
From Keating to Howard

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Chapter One

Introduction:
The Crisis in Australian Political Culture

This book deals with a crucial aspect of current Australian politics, namely how key issues are conceived and framed in Australian political discourse and how governments attempt to ‘sell’ the resulting policy to the electorate. It concentrates on the discourse of the Keating and Howard governments, focusing on the challenges posed by the rapid social, economic and technological changes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Key social issues addressed include the changing roles of race, ethnicity and gender in Australian political discourse. Key economic issues include the changing relationships between state and economy in Australian politics and the development of new forms of economic governance associated with neo-liberal ideology. Key technological issues addressed include the influence of technologically determinist discourse; the impact of new information technology on discourses of globalisation and the new conceptions of the ‘political’, ‘economic’ and ‘cultural’ related to the development of an information economy.

The arguments presented here draw on an in-depth discussion of the content of government speeches and policy documents. However, in order to understand contemporary issues, and the ways in which they have been conceived and framed in government discourse, it is necessary to draw on a range of analytical tools. Consequently, the book draws on relevant theoretical and analytical frameworks that help to explain the social, economic and technological challenges governments attempt to address in current political discourse. The book engages with a range of existing analyses of ideology and discourse, including those centering on issues of identity and difference. Some of those existing analyses, while theoretically informed, are derived from detailed discussion of the content of particular political texts and imagery, both in Australia and overseas, others are more overtly theoretical and abstract.

This book argues against simplistically applying existing analytical and theoretical approaches, particularly ones initially developed by major theorists from other countries, to Australian conditions. On the contrary, a strong case is made for the melding of relevant theoretical analysis and analysis of specific case studies, in order to strengthen both. The explanatory power of theoretical approaches needs to be continually assessed. Excessively generalising theories
rarely remain unchallenged when applied to specific examples. Part of assessing the utility of the work of prominent international theorists such as Habermas or Foucault involves not only analysing their own work but also that of Australian scholars who have applied such thinking to local conditions. It will be argued here that the specificities of the Australian context in fact make Australia a particularly interesting vantage point from which to engage theoretical perspectives that are meant to apply to a range of western societies. The book makes a case for judicious eclecticism on the grounds that a number of frameworks offer useful, if partial, insights. Nonetheless, existing theories and analyses also tend to have a major flaw — namely that they underestimate the extent to which traditional government discourse, and political ideologies such as liberalism, can effectively respond to, and even incorporate, the various challenges. The main aim of the book is to analyse the content of Australian government discourse, with wider theoretical contributions that arise in the course of that analysis being of secondary concern. First, it is necessary to situate Australian government discourse within the context of the wider political discourse of which it is a part.

Australia: the background

The last two decades of the twentieth century in Australia were frequently portrayed as being periods of crisis, upheaval and uncertainty about the future. One might well wish to argue that there have been other unsettling periods in Australian history such as during the depressions of the eighteen nineties and nineteen thirties or during the second world war. However, such depictions are not surprising at the turn of a new century. Australia is a first world settler society coming to terms, however unsuccessfully, with the legacy of invasion. Meanwhile, Britain has turned towards Europe and the ongoing republican debate raises issues regarding Australia’s relationship with the former imperial power. We are an increasingly multicultural population engaging with a legacy of Anglo-Celtic dominance and a white Australia policy. Traditionally, we are a vulnerable economy internationally; one which never quite developed manufacturing industry sufficiently to be classed as postindustrial, trying to survive globalisation. Previously imagined futures of growth, prosperity and full employment are being undermined. We are a population currently of predominantly European descent, situated adjacent to an economic revolution in Asia that has challenged both white economic certainties of dominance and, more recently, world economic security. Meanwhile, legal challenges by Aboriginal peoples have undermined settler certainties of Australian land ownership and usage. For over twenty years, until the advent of the Howard government, identity politics based on gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality had achieved considerable success in changing social values and influencing the policies of state and federal
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governments. For all of these reasons, we are a society obsessed with issues of national identity in party political debate as well as in versions of popular culture from film to advertisements. Meanwhile, a postindustrial emphasis on consumption, style and information markets means that identities, in all their forms from indigenous to national, are saleable cultural artefacts. In short, the economic, social and cultural are being transformed.

It will be argued in this book that some elements of government ideology and discourse in Australia are very far from new. There are substantial continuities as well as discontinuities. As well, discourses of ‘crisis’ and ‘necessary change’ have often been used to justify the implementation of particular political agendas. In other words, the discovery and propagation of ‘crisis’ can itself be a discursive strategy. Nonetheless, governments have been attempting to manage dilemmas associated with change as well as longstanding issues and problems in Australian public life. Politicians have attempted to grasp some, or all, of these in differing ways. Hawke came into office having depicted the economic and social dilemmas of the eighties as being similar in scale to those faced by Curtin and Chifley as they tackled first the second world war and then the vexed issue of post-war reconstruction. Hawke went on to argue that Australia had to return to being a society that provided adequately for all of its citizens ‘if Australians are to accept the change and the stress associated with rapid economic growth and technological innovation’. For Hawke, part of the crisis was to face the need to introduce economic change while escaping the divisive and inequitable policies of a Ronald Reagan or a Margaret Thatcher. Soon the problems of rapid economic growth were to seem to be the least of our worries. Keating threatened us with the dystopia of the banana republic if necessary economic policy changes weren’t implemented. Successive Labor governments had to overhaul economic policies because Australia was becoming ‘an economic museum’. Keating also made dire warnings regarding a Reaganite or Thatcherite alternative regime if his government were not re-elected. Somewhat perversely, he now blames Labor’s 1996 defeat on the climate of fear and uncertainty that was generated as rapid change challenged both economic security and traditional identities. He admits that some of this uncertainty was exacerbated by his own economic policies.

Social commentators have also painted a grim scenario of rapid change and insecurity and have influenced the politicians’ views. Hugh Mackay has argued that ‘the story of Australia between the early seventies and the early nineties is the story of a society which has been trying to cope with too much change, too quickly, and on too many fronts’. Traditional personal identities are being
challenged by changes in gender roles, multiculturalism and unemployment. In short, ‘social, cultural, economic and even technological change has had the specific effect of fragmenting social groups and breaking down the sense of social cohesion’. As early as 1986, Mackay’s research was showing resistance towards multiculturalism amongst middle class Australians, including a belief that multiculturalism was diminishing and distorting a ‘traditional Australian identity’ which had ‘gone forever’. Graeme Turner has also drawn attention to the particularly fraught nature of Australian national identity. Responding to an overseas visitor’s observation that Australian advertisements were arrogantly nationalistic, Turner argued that ‘the continual naming of Australia within ... advertisements could present precisely the opposite of assurance and self-importance; the act of naming becomes incantatory, calling the nation into being’. Turner’s comment could apply just as appropriately to the discourse of politicians. The debates over identity and national identity have intersected not just with post-war migration and issues of postcoloniality but, as we shall see in chapters two and three, with the impact of globalisation and government responses to it. Indeed, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and republicanism have become indivisibly bound up with debates over deregulation, opening up the economy to foreign competition, and developing links with Asian economies. These far from inevitable linkages, which were forged quite explicitly in Labor economic discourse, have since been exploited by figures such as Pauline Hanson in racially motivated attempts to appeal to those detrimentally affected by rapid economic change. The fear of change was also to be utilised by the monarchists during the campaign against the 1999 republic referendum.

Another social commentator who has played a particularly influential role in shaping conceptions of change in Australia in the eighties and nineties is leading journalist and editor, Paul Kelly, in his book *The End of Certainty*. In words which were to take on a new resonance after post-mortems on Labor’s 1996 electoral defeat, Kelly has drawn attention to ‘the sheer pace of change in people’s lives — related to job security, income maintenance, the upheaval in the family, changing moral values and sex roles, concern over ethnicity and apprehension about rising violence’. Furthermore, Kelly sees these and other issues continuing to shape politics throughout the nineties: ‘The message is that Australia’s direction in the 1990s will be shaped by the battle between two great forces: on the one hand, the ongoing and irresistible globalisation of markets, and on the other, a cry from the people to reduce, even to halt, the pace of change, and to regain control over their lives’.

For Kelly, the success of the eighties and nineties lay in the defeat of the ‘sentimental traditionalists’, those opponents of change who rejected market-oriented reforms and wished to use protection, government assistance, centralised wage fixation and an extensive welfare state to protect Australia from the international economy. His analysis received ringing endorsement from Labor
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politicians. Keating was ‘inclined to agree almost entirely with Kelly’ that ‘the major battleground of ideas in Australian politics has become one between what he calls the internationalist rationalists and the sentimentalist traditionalists’. He differs only in asserting that there are still fundamental differences of opinion between the two major parties.\(^{19}\) Gareth Evans has written that ‘the innovative role played by the Hawke and Keating governments has been brilliantly characterised by Paul Kelly in *The End of Certainty* as involving nothing less than the final demolition of what he calls the “Australian Settlement”’.\(^{20}\) In a wide-ranging speech made while he was still governor general, Bill Hayden agreed that we were ‘in the well chosen words of Paul Kelly... at the end of certainty’. Hayden went on to proclaim the end of ideology and of socialism, in a period of globalisation and rapid technological change.\(^{21}\) Right-wing social commentator, Gerard Henderson, also visited the end of ideology debate, while acknowledging it to be somewhat flawed. As he reminds us, the original fifties debate took place in a totally different political context since the apparent ‘end of ideology’ was based upon a western consensus on state intervention, in which that enthusiastic supporter of free markets, Friedrich Hayek, was a totally marginalised, and then decidedly extremist, dissenter. Nonetheless, Henderson too has claimed that, given Australia’s place in the international economy, ‘in Australia during the mid-1990s there is little room for major policy divergence between the major parties’.\(^{22}\)

The last two decades of the twentieth century posed considerable challenges to traditional Australian political culture and discourse in terms of social and economic policy. Indeed, for some, the victory of free market policies, and the consequent emphasis on reducing the role of government, has marked the ‘end of politics’.\(^{23}\) As we shall see in chapter two, previous Keynesian conceptions of the harmony of interests between the public and private sector were increasingly undermined as the eighties and nineties progressed. It was argued that the forces of globalisation, coupled with changes in information technology, necessitated the final abandonment of earlier policies of protection and industry assistance.\(^{24}\) Deregulation, corporatisation and privatisation became the order of the day as a new economic consensus emerged around market-oriented policies.\(^{25}\) By the early nineties, Jenny Stewart could claim that ‘Australia’s governing elite has been held in thrall by the dogma of the level playing field: the belief that the path to prosperity lies in exposing our industries to the cleansing power of market forces’.\(^{26}\) She claimed that ‘politicians from both sides were mesmerised by the doctrines of the economists, differing from each other only in their professed zeal to put the entire prescription into effect’.\(^{27}\) Australia was not, of course, been alone in introducing such policies, which have been particularly prevalent throughout the English-speaking west as numerous governments used state power to implement market policies. In the words of Janine Brodie, writing in the Canadian context, ‘it is important to stress that the ascendency of the market over politics does not mean that the state is
disappearing. Rather, state power has been redeployed from social welfare concerns and economic management to the enforcement of the market model in virtually all aspects of everyday life'. This, incidentally, is one of the many reasons why the aforementioned proclamation of the end of politics seems to be both premature and exaggerated.

As we shall see in subsequent chapters, despite the explicit emphasis on economic pragmatism present in so much political discourse, both Howard and Keating and, to a lesser extent Hawke, acknowledged that the crises facing Australia are also symbolic ones that involve challenges for Australian political culture. An essential role of government has been to tell stories about both Australia’s past and future that attempt to allay the electorate’s fear and justify the policy changes that will be introduced. In the case of Hawke, these stories were often less explicit since much of his tale about the country was implicit in his persona. Hawke was the (then) reformed womanising and drunken larrikin who could bring Australian business and labour mates together to rebuild a prosperous Australian capitalism. His persona was shaped around a particular conception of Australian masculinity that was a political statement in itself. No wonder he told Keating, and the Australian public, not to get their knickers in a knot over republicanism. Hawke’s task was to overcome the divisiveness of the Fraser years, deal matter-of-factly with the country’s economic crisis and build a sound basis for the future. Even in his last parliamentary speech, the implication is that the potential for the Liberals coming into office, and instituting a Thatcherite or Reaganite regime in Australia, is the major challenge facing Australian politics.

For both Keating and Howard, the challenges were much more fundamental. For Keating, his task was to prevent the dystopia of the banana republic coming into being by transforming Australian culture and forcing the Australian economy to become internationally competitive. Despite initial suggestions in 1996 election speeches that the crisis was Labor-made, Howard’s task was to negotiate the feelings of fragility and insecurity amongst the Australian electorate. He hoped to do this, not by offering a Keating-esque grand vision of a co-operative capitalism at home in its Asian region and striding out on the information superhighway, but through attempting to reassure (some) people that the crisis was not as great as it seemed. There was no need to reconstruct Australian identity; white, heterosexual, Anglo-Celtic males could once again rest assured in their central role in Australian political culture. Australia was not an Asian country. White Australians could be proud of their history of achievement despite ‘blemishes’. People could be ‘relaxed and comfortable’. There was still a need for change, such as further deregulating the labour market, but the increased flexibility would merely increase employment and allow positive things, like mothers spending more time with their kids. Grand visions, for example of globalisation and technological change, were largely off Howard’s pre-96 election agenda, although they began to emerge later in his period in office. It was the politics of reassurance.
However, it was also a deeply contradictory process because Howard had to emphasise crisis in order to institute the politics of reassurance. He had, for example, to depict Paul Keating’s conception of history as far more negative than it in fact was. Keating became an advocate of the black armband conception of history when, in fact, his version of history both acknowledged past wrongs and saw late twentieth century history as a vindication of the long-standing Australian values of co-operation between social groups, tolerance and a fair go.  

Howard argued that ‘mainstream’ Australia had been repressed by an iron regime of political correctness and ridiculed by cosmopolitan new class elites that neglected the views of ordinary Australians. Furthermore, Howard argued that ‘special interests’ had captured state resources, causing a fiscal crisis for the common man. This was Howard’s partly engineered crisis and the one to which he claimed to offer solutions. However, in the process, he risked reinforcing the very insecurity he sought to alleviate. He also risked encouraging an extraordinary divisiveness in Australian politics that made many Australians, particularly those from marginalised groups, feel very far from relaxed and comfortable.

In the Labor Party’s unfortunate 1996 election campaign emphasis on leadership, Keating asked voters to respect him rather than like him; to admire his vision even while rejecting his perceptibly arrogant persona. As Meaghan Morris has pointed out, Keating did not ask the electorate to identify with him. Howard, like Hawke, did ask the electorate to identify with him in the 1996 campaign, and also appealed to a somewhat negative past image in doing so. However, Howard’s persona was that of a long-term loser and political battler asking the electorate to embrace a political leader that it had rejected so decisively nearly a decade before. His apparent vulnerability was part of his appeal to a vulnerable nation. Howard asked the electorate to resurrect him just as it was to resurrect Australian self-respect. His was an identity for fragile times. His vision of the future was one based solidly on the past. There were to be no fundamental breaks here and nothing too frightening or unsettling for the electorate, at least on the symbolic front. The impact of economic changes in areas such as the labour market, and the race debate, remained to be seen. At the time of the 1996 election, his business champions were not the high-tech, potentially big business competitors of globalisation but the reassuring business face of small business, your local shop owner facing a suburban rather than globalised future. The Liberals would get into office, ‘political correctness’ would be overcome, and the ‘special interests’ that challenged ‘mainstream’ Australia would no longer be a major problem.

After all, for Howard, ‘special interests’ are largely seen as industries benefiting elite professional advocates rather than as organisations and movements representing legitimate grievances by marginalised groups. Deprived of government resources, and the ideological bulwark of ‘political
correctness', Howard presumably expected these ‘industries’ to wither in the face of ‘mainstream’ opposition. Traditional identities and certainties would reassert themselves. It was a comforting scenario for many Australians, disturbing for others. It also constituted a fundamental change in the direction of Australian politics — just as fundamental as the introduction of economic rationalism in the eighties.

The strategy may have contributed to Howard’s electoral success in 1996 but was a problematic strategy for government. In practice, the climate of divisiveness was to influence much of the Howard government’s first term in office and contribute to the rise of One Nation. A so-called ‘race election’ was only narrowly avoided in 1998 by the passage of the Wik legislation. Howard’s decision to emphasise the unifying theme of good economic management, and to downplay race issues, during the actual 1998 election campaign was partly an attempt to counter the electoral challenge of One Nation — a challenge his own politics of divisiveness had inadvertently contributed to. A new tax became the unlikely panacea that would help us negotiate the move into the uncertain economic and social times of the next century, while sound economic management would help us survive the turmoil caused by globalisation and the Asian economic ‘meltdown’.

The emphasis on economic management reflected the continuing dominance of economic discourse that, in different ways, also characterised the periods of the Hawke and Keating governments.

Theoretical interrogations

Australian political science has acknowledged changes in political discourse since the advent of the Hawke government but has only occasionally drawn on theoretical and analytical debates about ideology and discourse to attempt to analyse the changes that are taking place. This is true of even the more insightful analyses such as James Walter’s *Tunnel Vision: The Failure of Political Imagination*. For example, Walter is dismissive of postmodern perspectives which, it will be argued here, have some useful insights to offer despite their problems. Key debates in the late eighties and early nineties centred on such questions as whether the Labor Party had betrayed Labor tradition, an important debate to which I also contributed, but one that too often tended to be limited to issues regarding the ‘nature’ of Australian Labor governments. Michael Pusey, a sociologist, provided an explicitly theoretically informed insight into Labor’s new economic rationalism in his important work, *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*, which was influenced by Habermasian perspectives. More about this book, and the adequacy of its Habermasian framework, will be said in chapter eight. Sociologist Peter Beilharz’s innovative work, *Transforming Labor*, drew on a variety of theoretical analyses from liberal, socialist to postmodern political frameworks. However, Beilharz’s project was very different.
from the one here. His book was largely shaped by an attempt to negotiate a third path between what he depicted as the nostalgic myth-making of Labor’s ‘left’ critics and the narrow vision of a pre-ordained, modernising economic rationalism justified by right-wing apologists for the government.35

Meanwhile, debates in areas such as political economy tended to concentrate on the arguments for or against economic rationalism. Many of the critics of economic rationalism coming from a political economy approach attacked it as ‘ideology’, often implying somewhat crude conceptions of ‘ideology’ as narrow dogma and false consciousness.36 After all, their emphasis was on economics rather than social theory. There were some very sophisticated perspectives on economic policy such as Stephen Bell’s Ungoverning the Economy: The Political Economy of Australian Economic Policy. However, given his emphasis on the close relationship between ‘the world of ideas’ and ‘the material world of power and struggles over economic advantage’, Bell also tends to say relatively little about broader analyses of culture and ideology.37

It is not possible to give a detailed overview of theoretical work on Australian political discourse and ideology in this chapter, however, as we shall see as the book progresses, two major theoretical influences have been Habermasian and Foucauldian, involving Pusey’s work on economic rationalism and contributions by various authors on governmentality.38 Postmodernist contributions have been made by sociologists/political scientists such as Anna Yeatman.39 There have also been some notable attempts by cultural studies theorists to analyse contemporary Australian political culture, most notably by Graeme Turner in his analysis of Australian nationalism in works such as Making It National and his edited collection Nature, Culture, Text.40 However, much cultural studies work such as Turner’s tended to concentrate on the media and popular culture. Meaghan Morris also provided a cultural analysis of Keating during his period as treasurer in her book, Ecstasy and Economics. Morris draws on a number of theoretical perspectives, including postmodernism. However, despite Morris’ call that she would like ‘to see Cultural Studies more informed than it has been in the past ... by debates in political economy and in geopolitics’, there has been very little cultural studies work done in these areas.41 Despite its interesting insights, Morris’ work doesn’t analyse the full logic of Keating’s economic position, particularly his attempts to reshape Australian identity and political culture.42 With a few exceptions, such as Morris, cultural studies’ engagement with policy has tended to be confined, as in the cultural policy school, to an engagement largely with issues such as media policy.43 This is despite Morris’ astute observation that ‘the distinctions between popular culture and everyday life become tenuous indeed’ as government becomes more interested in them. As government emphasises on changing work, family, race and gender culture reveal, ‘administrative/political, aesthetic/ethical modes of practice may not so easily, or even usefully, be distinguished once “everyday
life” has become — in the name of “culture” — an object of bureaucratic fantasy, policy desire and media hype, as well as a subject of seemingly unlimited cultural production.  

Australian cultural studies, unlike its British counterparts discussed in chapter four, may have been hesitant to engage with political culture. However, Australian political science has often been hesitant to engage with analyses of ideology and discourse, whether they come from cultural studies, neo-marxism, Habermasian, poststructuralist or postmodernist perspectives. This is particularly unfortunate given the crucial role which ideology and discourse play in the interpretation, framing and ‘selling’ of policy issues. Indeed, the debate has sometimes been over whether concepts such as ‘ideology’ are even applicable to Australian political thought. James Walter has noted the tendency by a variety of commentators, ranging from nineteenth century British Fabian visitor, Beatrice Webb, to Australian political scientist, Peter Loveday, to stress the pragmatic, rather than ideological character, of Australian political culture. Such views have been strongly contested. Walter analyses debates over post-war reconstruction in Australia in order to demonstrate that ideas have indeed been influential in everyday Australian politics and policy-making. He acknowledges the role of ideology in Australian political culture but sees ideologies as ‘internalized and perhaps largely unrecognized’ rather than operating at the level of the publicly disputed ideas which he discusses. Commentators such as Hugh Collins have argued that Australian pragmatism was itself a sign of a particular ideological influence, namely the ‘practical bent’ of Benthamite utilitarianism.

The debate about the roles of ‘ideology’ and ‘ideas’ versus ‘pragmatism’ in Australian political culture, seems to have shifted somewhat since the growth of neo-, or market-, liberalism. Here was a body of thought that was widely claimed to be ‘pragmatic’ by its proponents but which was also widely seen by its opponents as intensely ‘ideological’ and likely to have damaging economic and social outcomes, very different from those which its proponents predicted. As Geoff Stokes implies, economic rationalism provides a good example of how conceptions of pragmatism can themselves be ideologically shaped:

There are, however, other systems of ideas ‘embedded’ in practices within key parts of the governmental structure, and these operate to set the practical terms of government debate and action, especially on economic issues. Rarely set out in doctrinal form, they constitute the implicit ideologies guiding action of the public service. The current ascendancy of the ideology of economic rationalism in the key Commonwealth public service departments represents one powerful form of Australian political thought in action.

However, given the earlier debate over the influence of ‘ideas’ and ‘ideologies’ in Australian political culture, it is perhaps not surprising that, according to Martin Painter, some political scientists were unprepared for the rise of the market liberalism that underlaid economic rationalism. Indeed, so were some analysts of Australian
political ideology. Hugh Collins argued in 1985 that ‘Australia is a large grievance to latter day disciples of laissez-faire economics.... If their rhetoric is useful to a defensive liberalism, their prescriptions are implausible for any party in office’. Painter has pointed out that ‘the rise of market liberalism not only took most political scientists very much by surprise, but also caught them unprepared theoretically and analytically’. Once Australian political scientists were ‘faced with such a powerful illustration of the importance of ideas, the most common response was to import “the role of ideas” into pre-existing models of policy change (where ideas tend not to be central), merely by increasing the emphasis on this variable within the models’. It should be noted that Painter’s own analysis finds that market liberal economic doctrines were adopted because they were ‘appropriate for framing and dealing with issues of policy. They provided an effective organising framework for collective choice’ and consequently ‘once embedded market liberalism will not be shifted by partisan or group political mobilisation under the sway of an alternative ideology or political vision, but only if it fails as a collective problem-solving logic, that is, as technique’.

Painter’s explanation is a partial one that leaves open the question of what are the discursive and ideological conditions under which market liberalism will be seen to have failed, particularly given the plurality of possible interpretations of events and interpretations that are themselves influenced by ideology and discourse. Painter’s account of the influence of neo-liberalism also contrasts with Capling, Considine and Crozier’s analysis in Australian Politics in the Global Era. Their book places considerable emphasis on changes in political culture, despite central focus being on the impact of globalisation on Australian politics and political institutions.

This book argues for a need to continue to develop theoretically and analytically sophisticated accounts of Australian ideology and discourse. An emphasis on traditional political science analysis such as electoral strategies, chances and policy programmes of governments is, of course, extremely important. The research in this book is in no way intended to substitute for more traditional public policy or electoral analysis. The analysis here is intended to complement, rather than substitute for, more common Australian political science approaches by concentrating on the analysis of discourse and ideology. Such analyses are complementary because, while it is important to situate government discourse within its social, economic and historical context, it is always worth remembering that government perceptions of that context play an essential role in influencing policy as well as electoral strategies. Indeed, much of this book is dedicated to analysing the relationship between discourse, ideology and policy.

The arguments here draw heavily on a range of analyses of both ideology and discourse, which is one reason why both terms are used. It would be extremely difficult to expunge one or other term from the book given the utility of other authors’ analyses which use either ‘ideology’, ‘discourse’, or both.
However, both of these terms are extremely contentious and need defining. Terry Eagleton has listed sixteen definitions of ideology and states that he could think of many more. This is hardly surprising since the concept of ideology has a two hundred year historical trajectory and comes with much baggage attached. It is not possible to give a detailed account of that trajectory here. Excellent accounts have been given by political theorists such as David McLellan and Andrew Vincent. However, it is necessary to distinguish the approach taken here from a number of different approaches.

Firstly, the approach taken here will be different from traditional marxist approaches. To begin with, Marx’s conception of ideology was extremely narrow, given that he tended to privilege class factors as explanations for the influence of most belief systems. For example, Marx and Engels argued that class relations were at the root of beliefs that women should be in a subordinate position. Secondly, Marx held a negative conception of ideology. Admittedly, many analyses of Marx’s views have been excessively crude, suggesting, for example, that his views can be reduced to a conception of ideology as ‘false consciousness’ — a term that Marx himself never used. Nonetheless, while he sometimes seemed to use the term ideology to refer to all systems of ideas, there were also times when Marx did imply that, even if ideologies did not necessarily involve completely false beliefs, they did involve beliefs that were at least partially mystificatory. Analysing ideology therefore involved criticising mystifications, such as the belief that workers were paid the full value of their labour, in order to give a more complete and accurate picture of social reality.

In short, marxist views were generally assumed to be non-ideological.

Some of these dilemmas remained in later theories that sought to go beyond negative concepts of ideology. For example, Karl Mannheim, who saw ideology in terms of a ‘world view’ (or weltanschauung), argued explicitly against a negative conception of ideology on the grounds that all world views were ideological. However, as Andrew Vincent points out, Mannheim’s own conception ran the risk of importing ‘a more objectivist social scientific account, with all its subtle implications of a neutral observation language’ when giving an account of ideologies. In other words, Mannheim had not totally escaped from the perspective that his own views were somehow ‘outside’ of ideology. This dilemma is one that remains with us in much contemporary thought. Even the 1950s’ ‘end of ideology’ debate rested on an implicit assumption of ‘pragmatic liberalism’ — namely that, in the west, the left and right had compromised on ‘non-ideological’ support for a welfare-liberal, mixed economy structure. Yet this view of what is ‘non-ideological’ could be challenged from a socialist or a neo-liberal position, both of which would tend to see support for a welfare state/mixed economy as ideological. More recently, Michael Freeden, an editor of the journal Political Ideologies, has complained of on-going trends in
Introduction

both political parties and in academe to confuse particular variants of philosophical liberalism with neutrality.\(^{61}\)

In short, proponents of ideologies ranging from marxism to liberalism can have a tendency to see their views as somehow being outside of ideology, as neutral or self-evident truths. Other people’s views are ideological, not their own. By contrast, the approach taken in this book is much closer to that of Andrew Vincent when he argues that ‘we examine ideology as fellow sufferers, not as neutral observers’.\(^{62}\) This book draws on a long political science tradition, of which Vincent’s book is part, of characterising bodies of thought as diverse as liberalism, conservatism, marxism, socialism, fascism, environmentalism and feminism as all being ideologies.\(^{63}\) The conception of ideology used here is one that sees ideologies such as liberalism or socialism as broad, umbrella-like, frameworks of belief and meaning consisting of concepts, ideas and images. Within the confines of the broad framework considerable contradiction and variety is possible. For example, this book discusses several variants of liberalism, as well as widely differing policy frameworks that could fit within a broad liberal framework. In this definition, ideologies are not depicted as forms of ‘false consciousness’ since the concept can include ideas which one would agree with just as much as ideas one would reject. This definition is close to that used by cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall.\(^{64}\) It is also a somewhat different conception from that used by some Australian political scientists who have contributed to the ‘Australian political thought’ debate discussed earlier. For example, it allows us to investigate the broad ideological framework which can help to shape or constrain conceptions of the practical issues of the day and the likely outcomes of particular policy choices. It allows for the fact that ideologies need not be totally coherent and can include contradictory elements. It allows us to examine the ideological underpinnings of patterns of ‘pragmatic’ thought which have not necessarily ‘been shaped into coherent and well-established bodies of doctrine which ... parties guard, expound and apply’.\(^{65}\) It allows us to understand that ideologies can operate at both internalised and public levels.\(^{66}\)

However, it is a definition of ‘ideology’ that is also compatible with more detailed definitions used by political theorists such as Andrew Vincent, who writes:

In my own view ideologies are bodies of concepts, values and symbols which incorporate conceptions of human nature and thus indicate what is possible or impossible for humans to achieve; critical reflections on the nature of human interaction; the values which humans ought either to reject or aspire to; and the correct technical arrangements for social, economic and political life which will meet the needs and interests of human beings. Ideologies thus claim both to describe and to prescribe for humans. The two tendencies are intermingled in ideology. Ideologies are also intended both to legitimate certain activities or arrangements and to integrate individuals, enabling them to cohere around certain aims.\(^{67}\)
Vincent’s definition does not allow sufficiently for the possibility of contradictory elements within ideologies. The preferred definition allows for both the possibility of some contradiction and essential coherence.

Vincent’s points about conceptions of human nature and integrating individuals are particularly important. Vincent is probably thinking here of obvious issues, such as differences between laissez-faire liberal and socialist views of human nature — whether it is conceived in acquisitive and competitive or more co-operative ways. However, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, recent theories of ideology and discourse have also raised other important issues about human nature and integration by analysing the ways in which the citizen subject of political discourse is constructed. In one sense this has always been an issue in theories of ideology, for example, Marx’s political writings contain numerous references to the influence of class in shaping citizen identities. More recent debates have raised other issues, for example, concerning the ways in which traditional political ideologies tended to construct individual citizens in gendered, racial or ethnic terms. In other words, key aspects of ideologies and discourses are being reconceived. Harriet Bradley has argued that postmodern concerns with identity and subjectivity are a direct attempt to replace, and move beyond, earlier marxist concerns with class consciousness, and dominant ideologies, by looking at the multiple forms which people’s own identifications can take. In other words, identity issues are seen as crucial for understanding not just how ideologies and discourses are constituted but also for understanding influences on the consciousness (and self-regulating practices) of individuals and groups. Debates around identity and difference have therefore been closely interlinked with debates around ideology and discourse. Issues of identity are not merely seen to be a major part of the content of key political ideologies and discourses but the construction of particular conceptions of the citizen/subject is now seen to be a crucial aspect of what ideologies and discourses ‘do’. The resulting discussions will be seen to have particular relevance to the content of Australian government discourse given the prominence of issues such as inclusion/exclusion, the ‘mainstream’, ‘special interests’ and ‘political correctness’, all of which at least revolve around issues of identity. Indeed, a central argument of this book will be that issues of identity and difference have been quite crucial in recent Australian political discourse.

Needless to say, rejecting claims that one’s own position is somehow ‘neutral’ or ‘outside’ of ideology, does not involve rejecting the need for solid scholarship. Nor does it involve rejecting the possibility of critique. One can critique aspects of an ideology without believing that it necessarily involves ‘false consciousness’. For example, one can argue that issues of identity play such a crucial role in both the liberal ideology and discourse of the Howard government because Howard is responding to a substantially accurate perception that traditional constructions of the ‘mainstream’ have been challenged by the more socially
inclusive ideology and discourse of recent years. One may well disagree with Howard’s responses, arguing, for example, that they contribute to greater inequality. However, here, as elsewhere, one should not confuse a critical analysis of various political responses and power relations with the view that they are examples of ‘false consciousness’. On the contrary, there is a great deal of evidence to support many of Howard’s arguments regarding challenges to the ‘mainstream’, as he conceives it.

Sometimes, one may wish to argue that a view is factually incorrect as in the case, for example, of Pauline Hanson’s projections on Asian immigration but, once again, this is different from reducing her views generally to ‘false consciousness’. Even if her figures are wrong, there have been challenges to anglo-celtic dominance in Australian society and racial discrimination may be a quite calculated, if ethically questionable, response by advocates of anglo-celtic privilege in Australian society. Nor need one’s own critiques be based outside of ideology. One may draw on alternative ideological perspectives, for example, anti-racism, feminism, socialism or welfare liberalism, in order to critique aspects of ideologies that one disagrees with. For example, feminism draws attention to ways in which other ideological traditions tend to privilege masculine conceptions of the citizen. Many commentators, and the current author is no exception, will in fact draw on an eclectic mix of ideological perspectives when analysing a particular issue, as well as on views which could belong to several ideological traditions and on views which it would be hard to label in ideological terms.

However, the more positive, general definition of ideology is one that would be rejected by theorists who believe it is important to keep a negative conception, in other words, who wish to use the term only to refer to bodies of belief that mystify or distort the ‘truth’ as they see it. The negative conception of ideology is one that is held to by some critics as well as some users of the term. For example, Foucault would argue that the term ‘ideology’ should be avoided precisely because, in his view, it necessarily involves a conception that ideological beliefs are false and therefore necessarily involves a contrasting discourse that is constructed as true. While rejecting Foucault’s conception that concepts of ideology need necessarily imply a theory of false consciousness, this book will, nonetheless, make use of an equally contentious concept which Foucault himself much preferred to ideology, namely ‘discourse’.

Discourse is a term that has been popularised by linguists and by postmodernists and poststructuralists writing in a range of fields. The term is used notoriously loosely and often without an adequate definition being given. The usage of the term here will be close to the eclectic, composite definition given by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner when they write that:

Discourse theorists argue that meaning is not simply given, but is socially constructed across a number of institutional sites and practices. Hence, discourse
theorists emphasize the material and heterogeneous nature of discourse. For Foucault and others, an important concern of discourse theory is to analyse the institutional bases of discourse, the viewpoints and positions from which people speak, and the power relations these allow and presuppose. Discourse theory also interprets discourse as a site and object of struggle where different groups strive for hegemony and the production of meaning and ideology.75

Given the above definitions, and the rejection of a negative concept of ideology, use of the terms ‘discourse’ and ‘ideology’ will sometimes overlap in this book, particularly since some theorists discussed use them in ways that are very different from that of the author. For example, Habermas will refer to technocratic ‘ideology’ when this author would have used the term technocratic ‘discourse’. Similarly, Habermas and Foucault both use the term ‘discourse’ but in fundamentally different ways.76 However, in the author’s usage, ‘ideology’ will generally be used, as in the widespread political science usage cited above, to refer to bodies of ideas and beliefs such as ‘welfare liberalism’ or ‘neo-liberalism’. This is yet another reason why it is even more appropriate to retain the use of the term ‘ideology’ in a book that is dealing with government and politics than if we were, for example, studying medical or scientific discourse, where the relationship to ideologies such as liberalism would be only a small part of the study, if it were mentioned at all.

‘Discourse’ will often be used to refer to beliefs and practices at a more ‘micro’ level, for example, specific government policy arguments, or to refer to beliefs and practices which cross over major ideological divisions. Technocratic ‘discourse’ would be an example of a form of policy discourse which can be found in both liberalism and socialism, although, in chapter nine, I’ll be discussing a form of technocratic discourse that is increasingly used to justify neo-liberalism. However, I’ll sometimes also talk of liberal discourse when I am discussing the content of a particular variant of liberal ideology in more detail, for example differing liberal discourses around industrial relations or national identity. An additional reason for speaking of liberal discourse will become apparent in chapter seven. Discourse can have a very important meaning that goes beyond ideas and beliefs. As Best and Kellner’s definition indicates, one advantage of the term ‘discourse’ is that it can involve a particular emphasis on ‘practices’, including institutional practices, rather than ideas. Discourse is therefore a particularly useful term for discussing government beliefs and policies, since policy documents so often combine statements of belief and interpretation with actual practices which governments implement. Nonetheless, it will be argued later in this book that a concept of ideology is still useful for understanding the beliefs that shape different discourses, for example, differences in the policies and practices of the Keating and Howard regime. In short, the approach taken in this book endorses the stand taken by the editors of the Journal of Political Ideologies when they ‘assert the centrality of the study of ideologies as a vital
access route to an understanding of the nature of political thought and its bearing on political practice'.

Some theorists would also consider my usage of discourse to be far too broad and eclectic. For example, Fred Inglis has complained that discourse has ‘been horribly and pretentiously overworked’. Inglis argues that discourse is best used in the narrower Foucauldian sense to refer to such fields as the discourse of sexuality in relation to the self; law and the systems of punishment; medicine, and the related institutions of the hospital, clinic and the doctor’s surgery. A strong case will be made in chapter seven for arguing that Foucauldian analyses of discourse can usefully be applied to the understanding of Australian governments. Indeed, Foucauldian work on governmentality in the widest sense has seen the term ‘discourse’ applied more directly to government in the narrow sense of the state. Hindess, for example, writes that Foucault focuses ‘on the techniques of government and, especially, on its rationalities; that is, on discourses that address practical questions concerning how to conduct the conduct of the state and of the population which the state claims to rule’. In particular, the discussion here will concentrate on the state’s role in encouraging particular forms of self-regulating and self-managing behaviour amongst its citizens. The study of such techniques and practices could not be adequately covered by the use of a term such as ‘ideology’. Finally, and also contra Inglis, it should be remembered that the term ‘discourse’ is not confined to Foucauldian analyses. For example, Habermas’s usage draws on a long history in German political thought. In short, the term ‘discourse’, as well as the term ‘ideology’, is one that can be used legitimately in a variety of ways. There is no clear ‘correct’ usage, it is merely incumbent upon authors to state the ways in which they intend to use such terms.

At times, the discussion in this book will also refer to issues of Australian political culture. The concept of culture used here draws on usages from the field of cultural studies, although the analysis in this book will concentrate less on popular culture, in the forms of film, television, media and the cultural icons of everyday life than most cultural studies analyses would. Briefly, the term ‘culture’ will be used here in a sense similar to that used by Frow and Morris when they talk of culture as ‘a network of representations - texts, images, talk, codes of behaviour, and the narrative structures organising these - which shapes every aspect of social life’. Culture in this sense should not be understood as a unitary culture which is overwhelmingly agreed to by the vast majority of Australians. Cultural studies analyses, in particular, tend to stress cultural diversity, resistances, tensions and contradictions as well as the relatively common themes and narratives with which people engage in differing ways. Such approaches complement those of political scientists such as Capling, Considine and Crozier, who stress the need for dynamic, rather than fixed, conceptions of political culture.
One theme this book will address is whether the themes of crisis and uncertainty in Australian political discourse reflect more generalised problems in western political culture. At first sight they sometimes seem to do so. The literature on the disturbing impact of globalisation and technological change suggests that Australian problems are not isolated ones. Fragmented multiple identities formed around gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, style, and numerous other distinguishing features, are seen to abound in the postmodern world. The politics of nostalgia, such as that mobilised by Howard, are seen to be a common defence against the challenges of the new environment. Nonetheless, it will become obvious as this book progresses that many potentially relevant analytical and theoretical approaches neglect government discourse or, at least, neglect relevant aspects of it. After all, many of these analyses were developed in the context of analysing fields such as literature, media studies, popular culture or the discourses of technical experts rather than government discourse.

There are also wider questions of how relevant general analyses, originally developed elsewhere, are to the Australian context. Can the challenges to Australian, white, anglo-celtic, identity be analysed in terms of the challenges faced by European and North-American societies in a period of global economic restructuring? Can the relentless march of market relations into all spheres of Australian life during the late twentieth century, aided and abetted by the state, be seen, as Michael Pusey suggests, as a Habermasian scenario in which the economic subsystem increasingly colonises the lifeworld of everyday meanings and understandings? Can Foucauldian conceptions of governmentality help us understand late twentieth century developments in Australian neo-liberalism? Were debates over national identity, and the differing policies related to them, partly a way of encouraging different forms of self-regulating and self-managing behaviour amongst citizen-subjects as a Foucauldian analysis might suggest? Can theoretical writings on new information markets and cyberculture help us to understand how Australian governments have responded to, and discursively constructed, the impact of technological change on the Australian economy?

This book will argue that there are very useful insights to be drawn from more general theoretical and analytical perspectives. However, it will also caution against assuming that existing analyses are automatically applicable to Australian government discourse. As already suggested, many of those analyses are better at identifying challenges to existing government discourse than they are at analysing government responses. Furthermore, the unique disjunctions of Australian life, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, not only mean that many analyses originally developed overseas are not entirely relevant to Australian society but also make it an interesting place from which to evaluate them. Our singularity can provide a useful vantage point in criticising excessively universalising theoretical models. As Peter Beilharz has written in a different context:
The view of the future from Australia is always peculiar, because white Australian civilisation combines a Western cultural superstructure with a premodern export economy which has only recently been more fully industrialised and is now being deindustrialised. On the periphery of the world system, Australia arguably stands in a fascinating position when it comes to explaining the ways of the world. Australia is an interesting place from which to write because it is peculiarly modern, premodern and postmodern all at the same time.\textsuperscript{83}

Australia is also, one could argue, all the better as a place from which to assess the categories of relevant bodies of thought and develop our own analyses. The next chapter will deal with the Labor governments’ attempts to address many of the key issues raised in this introductory chapter.

Endnotes


9 Keating, ‘For the new Australia’, pp 2, 5 and 8.


the past: Gender, race and globalisation in One Nation discourse’, *Hecate*, vol 24, no 2, 1998, pp 92-111.


19 Keating, ‘For the new Australia’, p 4.


21 Bill Hayden, address to the Australian Stock Exchange Sydney, by the governor general, 4 September 1995, typescript, p 8.


25 One of the clearest statements of this position from a senior public servant has been given by the then secretary of the department of prime minister and cabinet, Michael Keating, in ‘The influence of economists’ in Stephen King and Peter Lloyd (eds), *Economic Rationalism: Dead End or Way Forward?*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1993, p 65. Politicians’ views on this issue will be discussed throughout this book.


36 This is not to deny that some of those analyses also made very effective critiques of economic rationalism’s ability to deliver its projected outcomes, see eg. Frank Stilwell, ‘Economic rationalism: Sound foundations for policy’ in Stuart Rees et. al, (eds), *Beyond the Market: Alternatives to Economic Rationalism*, Pluto Press, Australia, 1993, pp 27-37.

37 Stephen Bell, *Ungoverning the Economy*, p 58.


49 Collins, ‘Political ideology in Australia’, p 158.


51 Martin Painter, ‘Economic policy’, p 288. For example, the onset of the nineteen thirties’ depression could be understood by some as being a result of government intervention in monetary policy and by others as a result of market failure.


81 Capling, Considine and Crozier, Australian Politics in the Global Era, pp 111-12.
82 Gibbons, Contemporary Political Culture, p 16.
83 Peter Beilharz, Postmodern Socialism: Romanticism, City and State, Melbourne University Press, 1994, p ix.
Chapter Two

Shaping the Nation:
Labor’s Consensus in Diversity*

‘We often talk about policy-making as being like painting on a broad canvas. We begin with a vision of what the future will be: that is the first essential — no imagination, no picture. No faith in your ability to realise it, no picture. And, like a painter with a vision and faith, you begin to fill the canvas in, step by step, layer by layer.’ Paul Keating, speech at the 1995 National Social Policy Conference, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 7 July 1995.1

This chapter examines the attempts by Labor governments to negotiate the key issues that have been outlined in the last chapter, concentrating, in particular, on the Keating years. It will be argued that, by the nineties, Labor was attempting to develop a ‘big picture’ that responded to the rapid social and economic change of late twentieth century Australia, pulling various elements together into an electorally palatable form, designed both to reassure and unite the population. In particular, the Keating government discourse combined economic rationalism and social diversity. Changing economic times were to be combined with changing social times in a formula designed to benefit all sections of Australian society.

In particular, the chapter explores the key ways in which the governments attempted to integrate the social and the economic. This latter project was necessary not only because the governments saw such an integration as essential in order to meet the challenges of globalisation or to reshape Australia after years of claimed Liberal divisiveness and economic neglect but also because of a rightward shift in Labor’s ideological influences compared with previous Labor governments.2 The Labor governments tried to influence the shape of social identities in ways that were compatible with their vision of the new 21st century Australia they wanted to build. In other words, commentators who lauded Keating for suddenly taking up a wide range of social issues after he became prime minister had the emphasis the wrong way round. It was not so much the case that Keating was taking up a broad range of social and cultural issues, but that his government was attempting to shape Australian culture and social identities to fit the government’s broader economic vision. After all, Keating saw policy as a way of shaping group and national character: ‘Policy is the means by which the lives of individuals, families and communities are shaped. It is the means by which we shape the character and the future of the nation.’ Or, as he put it later in the same speech: ‘I see policy as a process of national reinvigoration and reinvention. I see it as a process of national character building.’3
There was therefore an essential continuity between Keating’s project as treasurer in the Hawke government and his broader social and political project as prime minister. His vision was far more integrated than critics such as James Walter suggest. As part of his project, Keating had a number of stories that he told about the decade of Labor rule and about past, present and future Australian society. These stories played an essential role in government discourse. The element that allowed these otherwise competing stories to be compatible was his belief that the invisible hand of the market (complemented by safety-net government provision) benefitted everyone. This belief underlaid and justified the government’s attempts to shape social categories and identities to be compatible with economic ones. In other words, Labor’s vision, its painting, was shaped around a very limited and economic, compositional sketch.

**Hawke, Keating and the shift in economic policy discourse**

As already indicated in the last chapter, the period of the Hawke and Keating governments saw a shift in the policy agenda and vision of Labor governments. While this did not constitute a clear break with Labor tradition, given that previous federal Labor governments also advocated co-operating with sections of private industry and introduced policies which included elements such as wage restraint, privatisation and cuts to protection, it certainly constituted a shift towards the right in the context of the post-war tradition of Labor governments. Briefly, a Keynesian (welfare liberal) influenced ALP from the Curtin/Chifley period on had seen a happy coincidence between the interests of state provision and the private sector. Government intervention could complement the market and prevent severe cycles of boom and depression, partly by sustaining private consumption levels through the provision of welfare benefits and government generated employment. Bill Hayden had already announced the demise of this simple Keynesian world of an expanding public sector in his 1975 budget speech, and the Whitlam government had already resorted to cuts in tariff levels to make industry more internationally competitive. By the time Hawke and Treasurer Keating had come into office the (somewhat utopian) hopes of a happy partnership between a substantial public sector and an efficient, profitable, regulated private sector were being increasingly replaced by a new economic orthodoxy which stressed the threat which an ‘excessively’ large, interventionist public sector posed to the private sector, particularly in a period of rapid technological change and economic globalisation. The hopes which post-war Labor governments had previously placed on a combination of a substantial public sector and a healthy private sector began to be placed increasingly on the market. A healthy, efficient and internationally competitive private sector was seen as the essential key for improving standards of living. The public sector, and levels of government intervention, were to be cut substantially in
order to increase market efficiency and profitability, although a significantly limited, safety-net level of provision would be necessary to complement the market. These arguments are all ones that are central to neo-liberal ideology, although during the Labor period it was more common to speak of ‘economic rationalism’. In the 1990-1991 budget speech, Keating boasted that ‘Commonwealth spending is now at its lowest level as a proportion of GDP since 1974, and in three years will be down to the level of the 1950’s.’ Small wonder that Keating had to cite the experience of the pre-Keynesian Scullin government, with its record of public sector and wage cuts, in order to argue that his government was more Labor than many of its predecessors. As James Walter has pointed out in his critique of the Labor vision, it seems particularly perverse that, in a time when everything was meant to be changing, Labor’s economic policy revealed similarities with that recommended to the Scullin government by Sir Otto Niemeyer in the 1930s.

The decade of Labor rule therefore saw a shift in the site of Labor hopes from big government and a significantly regulated market to a deregulated market and small government characterised by narrow targeting of benefits, privatisation, deregulation and corporatisation. Market relations increasingly pervaded all areas of government service provision including telecommunications, transport, health and education. There was a commodification of the social. In short, Labor was introducing a watered-down form of neo-liberalism. The vision of early twentieth century left social democrats that social democracy would incrementally undermine capitalism until a socialist society was created had been replaced by a project that attempted to combine social democracy and free markets.

Yet, far from being inevitable, Labor’s arguments regarding the need for a more free market agenda were highly contentious. Hirst and Thompson have argued that the rhetoric of globalisation was a ‘godsend’ for the right internationally since it provided a new argument in favour of deregulation, free trade and public sector cutbacks ‘after the disastrous failure of their monetarist and radical individualist policy experiments in the 1980s.’ However, as Goldblatt et al. point out, ‘globalisation is not a mere ideological construct’. There have, for example, been significant changes in the degree of internationalisation of the economy, in relations between different sections of the economy and in the degree of international capital movements. It is in the latter sense, of referring to a heightened internationalisation and interconnectedness of the global economy, characterised by factors such as new forms of transnational trading and international financial movements, that the term globalisation will be used in this book.

Nonetheless, despite the assertions of various politicians and government reports, it is far from incontrovertible that globalisation means that nation states must support policies of deregulation and free trade. On the contrary, in an important comparative study, Linda Weiss has made a strong case that state
responses to internationalisation will be absolutely crucial in the coming period. Similar arguments have been put forward for Australia. Belinda Probert has argued that developments in the international economy require ‘a new and historically even more important role’ for the Australian state involving new forms of welfare, state regulation, intervention and industry assistance. Her sentiments would be supported by other commentators such as Ann Capling, Mark Considine and Michael Crozier. Stephen Bell also argues that there are still significant areas of microeconomic and macroeconomic policy where increased state intervention is quite feasible. Meanwhile Dick Bryan and Michael Rafferty have drawn attention to the need for governments to address the changing relations, and growing inequality, between capital and labour rather than just seeing globalisation as involving issues of nationalism and state sovereignty. The need for government to tackle growing inequality is also emphasised by writers on globalisation such as John Wiseman.

Keating’s vision: The integration of social welfare and economic policy

The scenario presented above was, of course, very different from that portrayed by the Hawke or Keating governments. In his speech launching Labor’s 1995 election document *Shaping the Nation*, then Deputy Prime Minister Beazley re-stated the now familiar story that the governments had no choice but to introduce deregulation and other free-market influenced policies in order to make the Australian economy more competitive internationally. However, he argued that they did so in a way that safeguarded the interests of the less well off or, at least, made Australian society no more unequal than it had been before Labor came into office. Keating too argued that the Labor governments had been forging a new form of social democracy — a just and equitable society with a bright future:

I think we can look back on the past decade or more and see a whole new story told in a whole new way. I think we can see the development here of a much more sophisticated national equation. We have fashioned a modern Australian social democracy: incomplete and imperfect, but a very good place to live and work, with traditions, a spirit and a future that will not be denied.

Keating’s 1995 speech to the Social Policy Conference stressed that the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, rather than Howard, were the true champions of the battlers and that Howard would introduce Thatcherite policies if elected. A similar line of argument was anticipated by Hawke in his final speech as prime minister. It was a story designed to appeal to Labor’s more traditional working class constituency.
The Hawke and Keating governments did indeed achieve some worthwhile reforms. They can make a case that life in Australia was far more pleasant for marginalised social groups and for those on low incomes than in countries that followed the free market agenda more vigorously, and went further in dismantling the welfare state. One might also agree that there have been similarities between Liberal and Thatcherite agendas. However, in his justifications of government policy, Keating was telling only a very partial story of his own record as prime minister and treasurer. For example, Keating chided the economists for not becoming social thinkers to the extent that social policy people became economists. What Keating didn’t mention was that social policy under the Hawke and Keating governments was increasingly narrowly targeted in ways which, while not going nearly as far as many right-wing economists or the Liberal Party may have wished, did in fact draw on watered-down versions of a minimalist welfare state. Consequently, the repeated cuts to social welfare entitlements in the first few years of Keating’s period as treasurer, for example in the 1986 Budget and 1987 May Economic Statement, were rarely mentioned, including cuts to medicare benefits. The 1990-1991 budget papers lauded the decline in social security and social welfare expenditure as a proportion of GDP which had resulted from narrow targeting. Keating implied that the government’s targeting strategy was an inherently equitable one.

However, while one might praise any improvement in the conditions of life of the worst-off in society, and appreciate the efforts of social policy practitioners attempting to get the best possible outcomes from diminishing resources under a right-wing government, it is worth pointing out that the battlers’ republic was not built by redistributing from capital to labour. Indeed, one could argue that the underlying logic of the government’s position was rather to redistribute resources from somewhat higher paid wage earners to the lowest income earners, for example through targeting and flat-rate pay increases. Meanwhile business benefitted from higher profits and cuts to the corporate tax rate. In short, one could postulate that the logic of the government’s policies involved a redistribution amongst wage-earners rather than a redistribution from capital to labour. Furthermore, the government was quite explicit that a redistribution from wages to profit occurred. Indeed, Frank Stilwell has argued that about 10% of national income was redistributed from labour to capital between 1983-89 alone. In later documents, the government was keen to point out the existence of subsequent real wage increases as a result of past restraint and productivity increases. However, even here there was often a disparity between wages and profits. For example, the Labor Party’s (October 1995) ‘Economic News and Information’ section on the ALP website proudly proclaimed a real wage increase of 6% from June 1991 but also mentioned that ‘company profits before income tax have increased by 151 percent between June 1991 and June 1995’. 
Keating’s own claims regarding less inequality under Labor are also open to dispute. Peter Saunders has strongly contested the type of argument Keating used to justify the Labor government’s record on poverty and distribution of incomes. The Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training also argues that the top end of town did well under the Labor government while inequality of incomes grew. Even more sympathetic commentators such as Anne Harding argue that while the poorest 20% of the population were protected by tax concessions and cash transfers, the rich did get substantially richer and the middle 50% of Australians lost out. In his speech to the 1995 Social Policy Conference, Keating lauded the increase in superannuation coverage without mentioning the fact that superannuation increases were frequently granted in lieu of pay rises and with the long-term aim of reducing the amount of pension support payable by the government. Nor were the specific superannuation problems of women mentioned. Medicare and an age pension set at a minimal level of 25 per cent of average weekly earnings were cited as achievements of the Keating government without mentioning their previous origins in Whitlam government social policy (or the complication of wage restraint keeping down average weekly earnings). Similarly, criticisms of employment policy, child-care policies, native title or equal opportunity policies were not cited.

Furthermore, critics at the time pointed out that the government’s support for Hilmer-style public sector competition policy was likely to open government services up to increasing legal challenge. International private sector service providers would be able to claim unfair government-assisted trading practices as subsequent clauses of international trading agreements were ratified by the Australian government.

For Keating, there were no inconsistencies between statements regarding corporate profitability, deregulation, corporatisation, cuts to the public sector and the welfare of workers and the less well off because, as explained above, he believed that free market-influenced policies complemented by a relatively minimal welfare safety net, would eventually generate better standards of living for all. However, perhaps even more than Hawke, he recognised that the shift in Labor’s policy agenda, the nature of the government’s response to globalisation and the need to develop a society different from that under Liberal rule, necessitated the development of government policies which tried to reconstruct Australian social categories and identities in ways which fused the social and the economic. In Keating’s words: ‘good economic policy has a good social purpose... social justice and economic efficiency are not only generally compatible but generally complementary.... In fact I sometimes think it is the essence of good policy to find the points at which they fuse’. It is to this crucial issue that the argument in the second part of this chapter now turns.
One of the implications of the shift in Labor policy was the need to encourage the shaping of working class identities that were compatible with the new spirit of entrepreneurial co-operative capitalism, rather than confrontation with business. Keating felt that the partnership between the trade union movement and the government had achieved some success in changing ‘behaviour in fundamental ways’ by encouraging wage restraint, co-operation, consensus and a reduction in confrontation since ‘conflict in the workplace was not a quintessentially Australian way of operating’. In short, the government encouraged the re-shaping of both trade union and employer identity to be compatible with its economic vision. Workers who had different conceptions of their identity, for example, more solidaristic ones born from conceptions of class antagonism and collective struggle, were presumably reconstructed as ‘un-Australian’ and selfish troglodytes.

However, the changes went further than employer-employee relations. In speech after speech subsequent to becoming prime minister, Paul Keating drew a much broader vision of the Australian society he wished to create — multicultural, diverse, celebrating difference, benefitting everyone — a utopian alternative to the dystopian vision of the banana republic or (what he depicted as) the nineteenth century free market economy advocated by the opposition. By contrast, his vision would be compatible with late twentieth century social and economic change. In the government’s historical narrative, the ALP’s natural constituency moved from being the white, blue collar male industrial worker, co-operating with white, male employers in manufacturing industry, to being a member of any class, sex, sexuality, race or ethnicity working in cutting-edge manufacturing, a new information economy, or in the service industries, and all working together to make Australia internationally competitive. It would be a future society that celebrated diversity and multiculturalism while practising reconciliation with Aboriginal people. It would be a society undertaking a cultural renaissance in which, according to documents such as Creative Nation, Australian films would storm the world and we would be at the cutting edge of developments in multimedia and the information superhighway.

What we had here was an attempt by politicians to discursively capture both the future and the past and to construct historical narratives accordingly. It was fascinating how a government that projected itself as being pragmatic attempted to mobilise past and future imaginaries as a party electoral strategy. This was not a new scenario where Paul Keating was concerned, as for much of the eighties we had Keating attempting to capture historical narratives through a dystopian scenario of the banana republic — we have no choice, throw off hidebound traditions and sentimentalities, embrace economic rationalism or face a dystopian future. However, when he became prime minister, the banana
republic (with all its ethnicist overtones) was replaced with a more utopian conception of the inclusive republic.

The conception of an inclusive republic was certainly preferable to a non-inclusive one. The problem was that there were far more continuities than discontinuities underlying Labor’s views. Traditionally, much Labor government and party policy tended to be constructed around a conception of social harmony between wage-worker and employer, of which the Hawke government’s conceptions were merely a more right-wing version. Women were eventually tacked on to this male-defined agenda as an afterthought. Keating’s inclusive citizenship for women was based on a very limited market-based conception of citizenship rights. Just as in the case of women, there was still a crude economic reductionism lurking beneath the other versions of citizen diversity that the government was fostering for the inclusive republic. Citizenship was conceived in very narrow terms constrained by particular constructions of economic necessity and limited economic resources. This was just the latest version of Labor’s social harmony vision and, like so many earlier versions, the harmony between different groups was based on a conception of common economic aims. Indeed, the economic dissolved rather than fully recognised difference, conflict and inequality. The shift mainly lay in the ways in which Keating remodelled a social democratic version of Smith’s invisible hand so that entrepreneurial economic self-interest was now conceived to benefit the widest possible range of social groups.

It will be argued in what follows that, in order to integrate his social and economic vision, Keating tended to privilege social issues that were compatible with his construction of economic issues and not recognise others. Furthermore, he was trying to reshape constructions of the social in ways that fitted his particular economic vision. This is not to deny that the government’s conceptions in mainstream policy documents could go beyond economic reductionism but it is to suggest that the government’s vision was severely limited by the underlying framework and that the ‘social’ issues which tended to be taken up were ones that were seen as in some sense compatible with that framework.

Under the brave new cultural policies put forward in Creative Nation lay an emphasis on exporting culture and harnessing Australian creative talents to the new forms of media opened up by CD ROMS and the information superhighway. Creative Nation states that ‘culture...concerns identity’. Paul Keating might cite new Australian films as a positive achievement but Labor government policy had nothing like the complexity of arguments about Australian, ethnic or gender identity present in films such as Strictly Ballroom, Priscilla, or Muriel’s Wedding — nor did it address the critiques of narrow economic motivations implicit in many of those films. Informing new childcare policies was a belief that all women should be able to work to contribute to our competitive advantage — a scenario which not only linked childcare to work
rather than parental relief but also still assumed that it is predominantly women who juggle work and childcare. Influencing the republican agenda was another agenda about developing economic links with the fast-growing economies of Asia. Multiculturalism became increasingly seen as a resource for developing export links with other countries. Issues of ethnic identity were frequently discussed in a way that seemed to privilege their market value (while simultaneously reducing broader conceptions of identity to ‘food’ or ‘festivals’):

We very often talk about our cultural diversity as if it were purely cultural — as if it were primarily a matter of food and festivals. Yet, whether they were British and Irish migrants in the 19th century, or central and southern European migrants in the last half of the 20th, the real measure of their contribution is in their energy and vision — in their industry and entrepreneurship. We have with us tonight people from all over the world who live and run businesses in Australia. Who all pursue their personal ambitions and serve the Australian national enterprise. That’s the key — the key to multiculturalism, and the key to Australia’s future.

Labor’s particular integration of the social and the economic already posed problems for those who did not see their ethnic identity in terms of a saleable commodity and entrepreneurial activity but rather in terms of a shared culture and values, including different forms of kinship relations and other aspects that might be different from the dominant anglo-celtic culture. It also neglected arguments that the government’s own economic rationalist policies had contributed to the creation of a new ethnic underclass. Dissenting ethnic voices and identities were marginalised in Keating’s vision of twenty-first century Australia. Significant concessions were made in the area of land rights but, as Fiona Nicoll points out, Aboriginal art also became increasingly commodified as part of a process of Aboriginal people being encouraged to engage in reconciliation to white society rather than an equal reconciliation with white society. Not surprisingly, there were potential contradictions between more traditional Aboriginal conceptions of identity and the forms of economic identity being propagated by the government. Labor’s vision could not accommodate Gary Foley’s view that ‘A free-enterprise system is necessarily a concept alien to “Aboriginality”. ... If you are a person who believes in the free-enterprise system or its basic tenets like individualism, competition, and accumulation of wealth, then you are by definition not a Koori.’ The point is not whether Foley was right or wrong. Undoubtedly there are many Aboriginal people who’d disagree with Foley and many commentators would be concerned about any argument that suggested there is only one essence of Aboriginality. Nor would one want to exclude Aboriginal people from successful participation in mainstream (white) forms of economic life. However, the point is, what place was there for conceptions of Aboriginality such as Foley’s in Keating’s vision of Australia? Government arguments sometimes seemed to imply that land
rights were a leftover issue from our colonial settler past that had to be worked out before we could move on to create the dynamic twenty-first century version of an Australian capitalist economy. Robert Tickner, minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, predicted that there would be ‘a rapid growth in indigenous business and economic development opportunities over the next five years.... Priority areas for development will include art and craft, tourism, the pastoral industry and businesses associated with the mining industry’. The growth of such businesses ‘would flow from the achievements of the reconciliation process and the related social justice initiatives including the Native Title Act and the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Fund’. Aboriginal culture and identity were becoming ‘trendy’ due to the reconciliation process and therefore saleable. 49

Of course, Aboriginality is only one of the forms of identity at stake here. Numerous marginalised identities were being created in such discourse; for example, to mention just a few, environmentalists who believed that high economic growth was too damaging to the environment to be sustainable and wished to live a more green lifestyle; male workers who wanted to reconstruct masculinity by spending more time with their families through reducing work hours, productivity and the centrality of the workplace in their lives; people who saw themselves primarily as a transsexual or a lesbian rather than someone whose identity was centred around job identity. While Labor’s emphasis on economic identity might have been fine for those gays or (perhaps less frequently) lesbians who privileged the consumption element of the gay lifestyle, there were only so many issues in gay or lesbian identity that the narrowly economic could address. What if you were a cultural worker who wanted to produce art or film that wasn’t commercially successful or easily exportable? What if you were an Italian migrant who had lost their job in the (increasingly unprotected) manufacturing sector? The list of potentially marginalised (multiple) identities is endless.

As Len Ang has pointed out in another context, the politics of inclusion is born of a liberal pluralism which can only be entertained by those who have the power to include. She cites E Spellman’s words that ‘welcoming someone into one’s own home doesn’t represent an attempt to undermine privilege; it expresses it’. 50 Welcoming someone into one’s particular form of economy is much the same, particularly if the political agenda is one which makes it hard to contest the effects of deregulation and free market policies on less powerful and marginalised groups. If you believed the view that a privatised, deregulated and corporatised economy will benefit everyone, you may be pleased to be included but what if you didn’t? The arguments in this chapter have already suggested that there were substantial conflicts between the Labor governments’ economic agenda and their hopes to include groups, rather than the economic being the factor that united people. There is evidence that the Keating government’s economic agenda further marginalised some groups and (severely
limited) welfare spending wasn’t sufficient to overcome the problem. Above all, we need to acknowledge that Keating wasn’t just recognising and reconciling existing forms of diversity in his various speeches. Keating was attempting to construct a particular meaning for other identities, to actively shape citizen diversities in ways that were aligned with a particular economic project and a particular set of government policies. What claimed to be a story about diversity was really a story about another form of narrative closure.

The government was trying to use very simplistic and economistic mechanisms to reconcile a very complex plurality of perceived interests amongst and between Labor’s constituency groups. The government did not adequately address issues such as how various business organisations would respond to statements which attempted to reassure trade unionists and social security recipients. Nor did the Keating government adequately address how men with more traditional views on masculinity would respond to statements designed to appeal to feminist or gay constituents. Nor did it anticipate adequately the problems involved in attempting to appeal to Howard’s ‘battlers’ and its broader social constituency. Despite its deficiencies, Labor’s emphasis on social inclusiveness and diversity did challenge those electors who felt that their anglo-celtic, heterosexual or masculine privilege was being undermined. Meanwhile, traditional members of the blue collar working class faced real wage cuts, declining job prospects as their industries restructured and loss of benefits due to narrow targeting. Women and ethnic and racial groups that were already disadvantaged in the labour market risked being disproportionately affected by the government’s economic policies and public sector cut-backs.

Keating’s somewhat glib statements regarding the compatibility between the government’s economic and social policy that were cited at the beginning of this chapter therefore turn out to be both more simplistic and more complex than they might at first seem. So do Keating’s stories of the present, past and future good life under Labor. They were simplistic in their assumptions that social and economic policies can be so easily reconciled. They were complex in terms of what they revealed about the government’s own attempts to shape constructions of the social in ways that facilitated a simplistic reconciliation between the two. As we shall see in the next chapter, the Keating government’s ‘big picture’ helped to set the scene for a conservative backlash against rapid social change, which I have termed ‘the revenge of the mainstream’. It also contributed to on-going problems within the ALP as some Labor critics argued that Keating had lost the election because he neglected class issues in favour of elite special interests. Rather than targetting economic rationalism for its effect on the socially diverse (and intersecting) groups which formed the economically disadvantaged, many Liberal and Labor critics implied that battlers had lost out to the special pleading of feminist, ethnic and Aboriginal groups. In short, the Keating government’s simplistic enmeshing of the social and the economic, and
Labor’s failure to address adequately the complexities of social and economic inequality, were to contribute to some particularly problematic outcomes.

Endnotes

* An earlier version of these arguments was published as Carol Johnson, ‘Shaping the social: Keating’s integration of social and economic policy’, *Just Policy*, no 5, February 1996, pp 9-15.


6 Johnson, ‘Labor governments then and now’.

7 Johnson, ‘Labor governments then and now’.


18 Beazley, ‘Shaping the nation’.


36 Paul Keating, speech to the ACTU Congress, p 1807.
38 Johnson, *The Labor Legacy*.
42 Keating, Commonwealth Cultural Policy launch, p 2445.
50 Ien Ang, ‘I’m a feminist but ... “other” women and postnational feminism’ in Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle (eds), Transitions. New Australian Feminisms, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1995, p 73.
Chapter Three

Howard, Labor and the Revenge of the Mainstream

The previous chapter analysed the Keating government’s discourse, particularly the government’s attempts to combine a version of neo-liberal economic ideology with discourses supporting social diversity. In short, Keating’s ‘big picture’ was designed to reassure voters in a period of rapid economic and social change, offering a vision of a prosperous future Australian society, built by the labour of diverse social groups co-operating together. Indeed, a diversity of language and cultural skills was seen as being part of Australia’s competitive advantage over more monocultural societies in a period of globalisation.

This chapter aims to provide some of the necessary background to the more detailed discussion of Liberal government policy discourse in subsequent chapters. It focuses on Howard’s attempts to develop an alternative discourse in response to both the Keating government’s discourse and to the key social and economic issues of the nineties set out in the introduction. In this chapter, I’ll be suggesting that what I term the ‘revenge of the mainstream’, is partly a response by government to three main factors: the challenges the social movements have posed to ‘mainstream’ identity and control of state resources; the challenges which globalisation, and economic rationalist responses to it, have mounted to traditional conceptions of ‘mainstream’ identities and the Howard government’s strong opposition to the inclusive discourse which the Keating government was practising in response to the demands of social movements and globalisation. All of these changes have, I wish to suggest, involved particular political problems for governments which privilege economic discourse.

Howard was only too willing to acknowledge feelings of uncertainty at the close of the twentieth century. Indeed, polling had been drawing attention to voters’ feelings of uncertainty at social and economic change since the late eighties. The 1988 Coalition policy document, *Future Directions*, which Howard had played a key role in developing, told a story of increasing voter insecurity because of the pace of economic, technological and social change. *Future Directions* drew attention to factors such as the decline of secondary industry, the growth of the services sector, increasing numbers of women in the workforce, changing social values and challenges to family structures. *Future Directions* also argued that insecurity arose from re-interpretations of the past as Australians were being made to feel guilty ‘for wrongs committed generations ago’. The outcome was a deep sense of fear and uncertainty:
Insecurity replaced certainty as people came to feel they had lost their way, their security and their sense of direction. As a consequence many came to fear change even more. Taught to be ashamed of their past, apprehensive about their future, pessimistic about their ability to control their own lives let alone their ability to shape the character of their nation as a whole, many came to see change as being in control of them instead of them being in control of change.

*Future Directions* aimed to address problems of rapid social change by reversing anti-family attitudes and providing positive incentives for the family, such as a tax policy that recognised the costs involved in raising children. Economic and welfare policies would include looking after ‘the battler’, who had been neglected by Labor while encouraging self-reliance by business and individuals rather than dependence on government.

In other words, Coalition discourse aimed to attract voters alienated by the real wage and social services cuts that were documented in the previous chapter. Current social ‘divisions’ would be countered by building ‘one nation’ which celebrated the ‘core values which unite us as Australians’ and moved away from those Aboriginal and multicultural programmes which discouraged communities from participating ‘in the mainstream of Australian life’. Labor had benefitted ‘sectional’ interests and the Coalition promised to create ‘one Australian community and one nation again and to put behind us the growing unfairness and divisions of the last six years’.

*Future Directions* was designed to be Howard’s election manifesto but he lost the Liberal Party leadership to Andrew Peacock the year before the 1990 election. However, in retrospect, one can see that *Future Directions* already contained many of the key elements which Howard was to build on in the lead-up to the 1996 election. Managing change and uncertainty remained a central theme for Howard and the Coalition, although by the nineties the intersections of economic and technological change were often characterised in terms of ‘globalisation’. Howard argued in one of his 1995 Headland speeches as leader of the opposition that ‘in the past two decades the world economy has undergone a revolution reflecting the forces of globalisation and technological change’. In another Headland speech, he suggested that ‘there is mounting evidence that the Australian sense of self-confidence is being eroded like nothing before. In fact, if there is one word to describe the current mood of many Australians, and especially their belief in what the future might hold for themselves and their children, that word would be “uncertainty”’.

Howard was particularly critical of attempts by the Keating government to influence constructions of national and personal identity, seeing them as a form of social engineering and arguing that ‘the suggestion that we have yet to develop a proper identity, or that government can deliver us a new and improved one, treats us like children. It smacks of Big Brother’. In Howard’s view, the Keating government was not only ‘divisive’ and ‘manipulative’ but Keating
was ‘prepared to politicise national identity’ and ‘engaged in an attempted heist of Australian nationalism’. Howard particularly objected to the Keating government’s form of inclusiveness which he saw as an attack on Australian national identity and the national interest. Howard emphasised two concepts that were implicit in *Future Directions* but never fully developed, namely the concept of the ‘mainstream’ versus a concept of ‘special interests’. A key argument of Howard’s against the Keating government was precisely that ‘the power of one mainstream has been diminished by this [the Keating] government’s reactions to the force of a few interest groups’. As a consequence, many ‘Australians in the mainstream feel utterly powerless to compete with such groups, who seem to have the ear completely of the government on major issues...Under us, the views of all particular interests will be assessed against the national interest and the sentiments of mainstream Australia’.

Unlike Labor, the Liberals would govern ‘for all Australians’. The concept of ‘sectional interests’ was already present in *Future Directions*. Later Coalition policy documents such as *Fightback!* (1991) and *The Things That Matter* (1994) also contained arguments against Labor’s favouring of ‘sectional’, ‘vested’ or ‘special’ interests. They criticised Labor’s related emphasis on ‘groups’, ‘stereotypes’ and ‘categories’ rather than individuals, and Labor’s attempts to redefine national identity accordingly. Indeed, John Hewson’s attacks on ‘vested interests’ saw him antagonise many key lobby and interest groups in the lead-up to the 1993 election. During his time as leader of the opposition, Hewson mainly targeted vested interests such as business and welfare lobbyists, although he had also begun to mention Aboriginal ‘special interests’ and question multiculturalism by the end of his term. While Hewson’s previous meaning of vested interests remained under Howard, Liberal usage of the term ‘special interests’ came to be much more closely connected to debates over the politics of identity and issues of political correctness. The concept of the ‘mainstream’ had been prefigured in conservative critiques of multiculturalism from the early eighties, which had already included suggestions that multiculturalism undermined mainstream Australian values.

Despite his arguments that he would govern for ‘all’ Australians, Howard was responding to what he saw as a sense of injury and threat felt by sections of the so-called ‘mainstream’, who were challenged by the more socially inclusive Labor policies outlined in the last chapter. Neither Howard, nor the Liberals, provided a definitive, explicit definition of who constitutes the ‘mainstream’ or ‘special interests’. Prior to the ‘96 election the concepts were left intentionally vague. However, Howard’s attack on so-called ‘political correctness’ was a way of signalling that the Coalition’s targets included feminists, gays and lesbians, multicultural groups and Aboriginal organisations. The threat to traditionally powerful identities was not an imagined one, despite the enormous power which groups associated with the ‘mainstream’ still wield.
For example, while Anglo-Celtic culture still remained dominant in Australian political culture and institutions, Labor’s policies did challenge older views that cultural difference should be assimilated into anglo-celtic culture. Labor’s perspective suggested that there were huge advantages to be gained by fostering and supporting cultural diversity — indeed that cultural difference constituted a niche market or skilled resource for building exports. Consequently, Anglo-Celtic culture was to be privileged less than in traditional assimilationist models, where the aim was for people from diverse backgrounds to eventually become more and more like Anglo-Celts.15

Keating’s statements about orienting Australia towards Asia also involved the implication that Australia should be oriented less towards Britain and Europe. Furthermore, Labor discourse involved a vision of diverse groups from women to gays and lesbians and members of different ethnic groups co-operating together to rebuild the Australian society and economy. Not only was marginalised group identity recognised, it was seen as socially and economically beneficial. Such views did challenge perspectives that unproblematically privileged ‘mainstream’ identities ranging from more traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity to more traditional conceptions of the superiority of anglo-celtic and, to a lesser extent, European, values. It was not just the most powerful ‘mainstream’ identities that were being threatened but subordinate ‘mainstream’ identities as well. For example, de-industrialisation posed threats to some versions of blue collar masculinity as did changing gendered patterns of employment, feminism and gay and lesbian politics. Similarly, some white, heterosexual women could feel threatened, particularly those in more traditional familial and home relationships.

Race and ethnicity were particularly important issues in the attack on ‘political correctness’. Howard argued after six months in office that ‘one of the great changes that have [sic] come over Australia in the last six months is that people do feel able to speak a little more freely and a little more openly about what they feel’. He went on to assert that in a sense the pall of censorship on certain issues has been lifted: ‘I welcome the fact that people can now talk about certain things without living in fear of being branded as a bigot or as a racist’.16 There is a personal component here. During the 1988 race debate, Howard had protested about ‘being kicked from one end of the nation to the other for being a bigot or racist... that’s just nonsense’.17 In his December 1995 speech, ‘Politics and Patriotism’, Howard complained about the Labor government imposing ‘political correctness’ on artists and writers.18 Shortly after the election Howard argued that the government would not be put off by notions of ‘political correctness’ in its attempts to audit ATSIC.19 Howard has made similar comments in a number of speeches where he critiques aspects of ‘political correctness’, including the ‘black armband’ view of history which he contentiously claimed had dominance during the Keating period.20 His reluctance to re-visit
Australian history contributed to his government’s refusal to give an official apology to the stolen generations of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families.\(^{21}\) Howard has also suggested that a lot of ‘mainstream people’ object to the fact that ‘there’s a bit of a ruling political elite’, including people in the press, who have suggested that the public is ‘too stupid’ to be trusted to speak about issues such as immigration and multiculturalism.\(^{22}\)

Howard’s sustained attack on the Keating government and political elites makes it clear that the ‘revenge of the mainstream’ discourse is not only about what Ghassan Hage has termed ‘the discourse of Anglo-decline’, in which the privilege of Anglo-Celts is seen as being increasingly under threat, although that is an important part of it. Nor is it just a debate about how to manage ethnic and racial diversity.\(^{23}\) Hage is correct to draw attention to such factors. However, the ‘revenge of the mainstream’ discourse is, in a sense, just as much about policing whites and Anglo-Celts as it is about managing the racial and ethnic ‘other’. In other words, it is about encouraging Anglo-Celts, heterosexuals and other members of the ‘mainstream’ to construct their own identity as unquestioningly central and other identities as ‘special interests’. It is about discouraging Anglo-Celts, heterosexuals and others who do not wish to privilege their identity by denouncing them as ‘politically correct’, elitist, social engineers who are disempowering their compatriots.

The strategy of arguing that conservative groups have been oppressed by ‘political correctness’ has North American antecedents.\(^{24}\) Ellie Vasta has argued that such arguments are deeply flawed in the Australian context. Not only does the so-called discrimination that some Anglo-Australians claim they are suffering from in fact involve ‘attempts to redress the effects of discrimination and exclusion experienced by migrants and indigenous Australians’ but ‘Anglo-Australians have benefited from that dominant Anglo identity whether they are racist or not’.\(^{25}\) It should also be noted that Australian anti-discrimination measures have not relied on the imposition of quotas for marginalised groups — a factor that helped fuel the American backlash against political correctness — but on the need for equal opportunity and the recognition of merit. However, in another sense, the arguments of the conservatives do reflect the fact that the authority of the traditional ‘mainstream’ has been severely challenged in the late twentieth century. One might well wish to argue that the ultimate revenge of the ‘mainstream’ is to steal the identity of victim.

Part of making the Australian people feel ‘relaxed and comfortable’, to use one of Howard’s phrases during the 1996 election, was precisely to reinforce ‘mainstream’ identities and ensure that marginalised identities stayed non-threatening and subordinate.\(^{26}\) The ‘mainstream’ and Australian identity were being constructed as one and the same thing by a sleight of hand that simultaneously talked of all Australians and marginalised ‘special’, ‘minority’ interests. Prior to the election, the concepts were vague enough to allow a
plurality of interpretations and identifications by electors. In particular, Howard played the race and ethnicity card much more subtly than in the 1988 debate. Indeed, as Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope have pointed out, the Liberals went out of their way to reassure the ethnic vote before the election. Nonetheless, while Howard may have been preaching tolerance, he was also positively encouraging the revenge of all of those who identified with the ‘mainstream’. The content of the Howard government’s position became much clearer after the 1996 election, particularly in the context of government interventions over land rights and extensive budget cuts to programs for ‘special interest’ groups such as Aboriginal people and women. Indeed, Howard is particularly proud of the fact that ‘I’m the prime minister who took money out of the ATSIC budget ... any suggestion that we have perpetuated the Aboriginal industry is wrong’. The seeds of later differences with Aboriginal communities and the construction of Aboriginal organisations as ‘special interests’ that could be excluded from the final Wik negotiations were set quite early in office, if not before. Given his attempts to woo ‘the battlers’, Howard was initially careful about spelling out the fact that he sees unions as ‘special interests’, although the implication was clear in his position on industrial relations, particularly in his encouragement of individualism amongst Australian employees. Later, Howard was to be quite explicit in referring to the Maritime Union of Australia as a ‘special interest’ during the 1998 waterfront dispute.

The meaning of attacks on ‘special interest groups’ has also become clear in the Howard government’s clever manipulation of the symbolic, for example, in Howard’s insistence on the word ‘chairman’ as part of what the Daily Telegraph has termed ‘an unofficial backlash within the government against what are seen as politically correct terms’. The word ‘chairman’ was used in legislation such as the Productivity Commission Bill 1996 and the Constitutional Convention (Election) Bill 1997. Howard’s move was endorsed by the then minister assisting the prime minister for the status of women, Senator Jocelyn Newman: ‘Call me chairman, my name is Newman’. The various government cut-backs to women’s organisations will be discussed in more depth in chapter five. After the 1996 election, Australians also discovered that ‘multiculturalism’ is a term that Howard is loathe to use. Howard had argued in 1988 that ‘I think there are profound weaknesses in the policy of multiculturalism. I think it is a rather aimless, divisive policy and I think it ought to be changed.’ It was not until 1999, under increasing pressure, that he endorsed the term ‘Australian multiculturalism’ which, he argued, retained an emphasis on common values.

Howard argues that he does practise tolerance towards marginalised groups, a practice reinforced in his speech claiming that there had been increased freedom of speech under his government. Despite his arguments regarding ‘special interests’, and attacks upon so-called ‘political correctness’, Howard argues that his support for the ‘mainstream’ does not involve an attack on the
marginalised. Indeed, he affirms that ‘inclusion rather than exclusion is also an essential part of the Australian identity’. He has also argued that, despite Australia’s past ‘blemishes’, Australians are entitled ‘to boast of [Australia’s] tolerance and openness and warm-heartedness and ... decency. Any manifestation of racism in our ranks is repugnant to everything for which Australia has always stood. It ought to be denounced, it ought to be identified and it ought to be guarded against.’ However, one needs to be particularly careful in terms of how one reads Howard’s statements in support of racial equality and tolerance. Discourses of equality and tolerance can deny racial difference, rather than affirm it. His arguments against racial and ethnic ‘divisiveness’ could be used just as much to criticise supporters of the rights of particular racial and ethnic groups as their opponents: ‘there is no place within our community for those who would traffic, for whatever purpose and whatever goal, in the business of trying to cause division based on a person’s religion, a person’s place of birth, the colour of a person’s skin, the person’s values, ethnic make-up or beliefs’. An emphasis on an assimilationist denial of difference also seems to underlie Howard’s statement that ‘we have been able to absorb people from all around the world because we have essentially been a group of people who have tried to deal with people on the basis of their merit and their individual qualities, and not according to pre-conceived notions of what a particular background produces’. For Howard, racism appears to involve a belief that people of different races are inherently biologically inferior. He does not seem to recognise forms of racism and ethnocentrism that involve privileging particular values and cultural identities, associated with specific racial and ethnic groups, over others. Hence, he initially repeatedly asserted that Hanson was not racist, although his opposition towards Hanson strengthened as One Nation became more of an electoral threat. Nor is Howard prepared to openly acknowledge that the current insecurities which many Australians feel in response to rapid social and economic change are directly related to challenges to previously privileged forms of ethnic and racial identity.

Howard recognises that Australia has changed and that ‘we are a more diverse, we are a more vibrant, we are a more cosmopolitan, we are a more global, we are a more internationalised society than we were several generations ago’. Nonetheless, he has been criticised for helping to unleash a racist backlash by encouraging an end to ‘political correctness’. Prominent Aboriginal activist, Noel Pearson, has argued that, ‘their deliberate use of the term political correctness is a flag they use to say it is now legitimate to go back to the ways we used to talk and think’. Certainly, Howard’s position opposing ‘political correctness’ and his own, much more subtle, playing of the race and ethnicity card, has made it hard for him to intervene against extreme forms of racially discriminatory discourse. Indeed, Howard has admitted that both he and Hanson have drawn on some similar resentments among the electorate. Howard has argued that Pauline Hanson
is ‘articulating the fears and concerns and the sense of insecurity that many Australians feel at a time of change and instability’. He also concedes that ‘there has been I believe in the Australian community a deep seated rejection of the politically correct and distorted view of Australian history and I have played a major role myself in rejecting that very negative view of Australian history and to some extent, she’s also tapping into that’.

Furthermore, a close examination of Howard’s policies does give a somewhat different view of the implications of his support for the ‘mainstream’ for more marginalised groups. Let us consider Howard’s argument that his support for ‘mainstream’ traditional family values does not mean that he is intolerant of other forms of relationships. In his view:

minority fundamentalism is based on the assumption that if you extol mainstream practices or values then you must automatically be intolerant of the values or circumstances of minorities — despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

I encountered this absurd phenomenon some years ago when I launched Future Directions. Rather famously that document featured a two parent family with two children in front of a picket-fenced house. Such a depiction spawned numerous stories that because I had represented an Australian family in that fashion I was in some way prejudiced against others.

Such an argument might seem more reasonable if it weren’t for the fact that his tolerance of non-‘mainstream’ forms of Australian families or sexual relationships does seem to be severely limited to say the least, despite his argument that his government is merely encouraging individual choice by women and others. Let us consider Howard’s attitude to homosexual relationships. Howard argues that:

I think we often make the mistake of confusing toleration and endorsement ... I think ... sexual preference is something very private and something that should go unremarked and not (sic) discriminated against. But equally there are certain institutions in our community that provide it with bulwarks and stability and marriage is one of them ... attempts to give the same legal status to homosexual relations as to marriage are not things I would support.

However, it is immediately obvious that heterosexual sexual preference is not constructed as a private matter but as something that can be publicly endorsed by the prime minister. Only some sexual preferences are ‘private’ and to be tolerated but not endorsed. ‘Sexual preference’ apparently only refers to ‘deviant’ sexualities. Nicole Feely, Howard’s influential then chief of staff, tried unsuccessfully to get Howard to send a message of support to the 1996 gay and lesbian mardi gras, something which Hewson and Keating had done before him, but he refused. Howard claims not to be prejudiced against gay people but has also admitted that if one of his children said they were gay ‘I’d
be disappointed, even upset, but it wouldn’t stop me loving them and caring for them’. Part of defining the ‘mainstream’ is precisely to construct some matters as central to community (national) identity and others as marginalised ‘private’ matters.

For Keating, despite his own government’s patchy record in regard to heterosexism, nothing was totally personal and private since most marginalised identities could be conceived of in ways that were quite compatible with the government’s ‘mainstream’ economic and social picture. The economic was constructed by Keating as an inclusive category that dissolved difference within the context of budgetary restraint. For Howard, the economic is constructed in the form of a budget deficit which positively necessitates cuts to ‘special interest’ groups. Indeed, for Howard, representatives of ‘special interest’ groups are representatives of welfare industries, such as the ‘Aboriginal industry’, rather than legitimate representatives of diversity. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Howard government’s record includes cuts to a range of ‘special interest groups’ from feminist organisations to Aboriginal organisations to ethnic groups.

The ‘race relations industry’ was a common term in Thatcherite discourse in the eighties. Nonetheless, one cannot read Howard’s discourse as just making a typical English, U.S.A. or Canadian New Right response of cutting the state resources given to the social movements after their campaigns of the seventies and eighties. To do so, misses the extent to which Howard was also responding to the Keating government’s attempts to re-shape Australian identity. Certainly, New Right economics predisposes one to cutting what is perceived as welfare and the individualism of a New Right perspective frequently precludes an understanding that people can be part of marginalised or disadvantaged social groups. The belief in trickle-down, the invisible hand, a minimal state and economic self-reliance also predisposes members of the New Right to cut benefits. All the same, what is happening under Howard is not just a dismantling of the welfare state by attacking client groups as special interests but also a dismantling of a version of the neo-liberal project which reshapes and commodifies group identities. It is common to see Howard’s thought as contradictory, in that he champions radical economic change while trying to offer relaxation, comfort, security and stability to the community. However, his position is less contradictory than it first seems. Howard is deeply apprehensive about some aspects of globalisation. Howard champions economic changes that he thinks will help business survive an increasingly internationalised world economy, including the small business that forms his own background. Deregulation of the labour market, weakening of unions and the resulting reduction in wages and conditions is one attempt to do this. Similarly, increased privatisation, cuts to welfare and public sector downsizing will increase the enormous transfer of resources from the public to the private sector that already occurred under Labor. These are measures to help local businesses increase
their economic competitiveness and their profits. However, Howard is also partly reacting against Keating's attempts to meld economic and social identities in a socially inclusive form. As we have seen, Howard explicitly related some of the uncertainty that people are feeling to the effects of globalisation. For the Keating government, globalisation provided new opportunities for the celebration (and commercial exploitation) of cultural diversity. For Howard, however, globalisation problematises the politics of identity in far more negative ways—and ways that are not unusual in the west at the turn of the twenty-first century.

**Globalisation and the revenge of the mainstream**

In her book, *Space, Place and Gender*, British author Doreen Massey takes issue with aspects of major literature regarding globalisation and the condition of postmodernity. While acknowledging the many useful insights that are provided, she argues that much of that literature is dealing with the condition of the late twentieth century from the point of view of privileged sections of the population within the first world. The feelings of being dislocated, placeless, invaded by the other, of boundaries being penetrated, of disorientation and a lack of control, have been experienced by the colonised for centuries, as they have been felt, in somewhat different form, by less privileged groups in so-called first world countries, for example, women. It is therefore predominantly sections of the first world population that are experiencing this as an unusual condition in the final part of the twentieth century. They are experiencing a 'changing geography of social relations'. While Massey is writing from very different circumstances to those in Australia, her argument is a useful starting point for throwing light on challenges to traditional identities and certainties in late twentieth century Australia. Indeed, one could suggest that colonial settler societies are encountering the changes even more explicitly as their former imperial powers decline in influence and indigenous peoples challenge settler certainties of land ownership and control.

Massey is mainly exploring the challenges globalisation poses to more traditional forms of western identity by drawing attention to such matters as post-colonial immigration to former colonial powers and the challenges to those powers by newly industrialising Asian countries. However, the arguments in this book suggest that the challenges posed by globalisation to government discourse regarding racial, gender and class identities go much further than that. The expansion of capital should be seen as not just spreading between countries and continents but also within them. Globalisation involves an increased commodification of domestic identities within the boundaries of particular nation states. These changes give rise to particular problems for governments which privilege economic policy discourse. Of course 'exotic' identities have always been commodified to be sold in the first world. However, what is now
happening is that the ‘other’ is becoming a powerful economic agent, no longer just the exploited exotic other, but economic producer and important consumer in both domestic and international niche markets. The expansion of capitalist relations occurs not just over geographical space but also over social space and time. Capital, in the form of market relations and commodification, expands and spreads through social relations and everyday life (and universities) just as its spreads through geographical spaces such as eastern Europe. Hirst and Thompson have provided a useful critique of conceptions of globalisation that see it as a completely new period in the development of capital. However, one can argue that so-called globalisation is a very distinct period in terms of its implications for identities — not that those identities can be reduced to the economic. Indeed, in the last chapter, I criticised the economic reductionist conceptions underlying the Keating government’s conception of identities; the way in which the economic for them becomes a meta-category that dissolves difference and constructs an overriding common interest that all social groups share. However, for our purposes here, it is important to note that the Howard government came into office faced not only with social movements that had some success in claiming state resources but also with a range of group identities that were being commodified — a process that the Keating government had consciously attempted to assist. By contrast, Howard’s conception of economic identity was much more a traditional conception of the liberal individual as rational economic man — a conception that traditionally constructed the individual in white, male and heterosexual terms. The Howard government has also been careful to argue that, despite the need to develop greater trade with the Asia Pacific region, this does not require ‘a surrendering of Australia’s core values’ associated with ‘a predominantly European intellectual and cultural heritage’. The Keating and Howard governments were responding to the challenges which globalisation poses in very different ways, the Keating government by embracing diversity and the Howard government by attempting to shore up traditional identities.

**Labor responses**

The legacy of Labor’s views on diversity made it difficult, at least initially, for the Labor Party to respond adequately to the Howard government’s agenda. The Keating government’s vision also involved a somewhat naive belief that the economic could dissolve difference and reconcile a range of social groups. Right wing economics is not a good analytical tool for understanding the complex power relations involved in the politics of identity. While acknowledging a long history of racism in Australian politics, Keating still seems genuinely puzzled that economic rationality hasn’t been enough to overcome the divisive debates
about Aboriginal people and levels of Asian immigration that have flourished under Liberal rule:

It does seem a remarkable thing to me: here we are in the last half decade of our first century as a nation, 18 million of us on a continent almost the size of the United States, one of the oldest and most stable democracies in the world, sitting adjacent to the most extraordinary economic revolution in the history of the world, and what appears to concern some of us most is the colour of people’s skins.*

He goes on to talk about the effect that debates about immigration will have on investment and export prospects and employment. At the same time, Keating does acknowledge that ‘globalisation’ has resulted in a huge feeling of insecurity and frustration as old certainties and identities pass away. He admits that some of these insecurities arose from the impact of his own government’s economic policies but argues that those policies were essential in order to prevent Australia becoming ‘an economic museum’ and to create ‘the foundations of a modern, competitive economy’.64

It is now common for Labor commentators to draw attention to the role played by change fatigue and other economic insecurities arising from globalisation in contributing to Labor’s 1996 election defeat.65 However, the conclusion seems to be that the answer lies in providing better economic security for those affected by globalisation.66 While providing economic security is highly desirable and may well decrease feelings among traditional working class supporters, exacerbated by narrow targeting, that some ‘special interests’ are doing better than they are, Labor still seems to be assuming that the economic, in one form or another is both the problem and the solution. The emphasis on globalisation that was used to justify economic rationalism is now used to critique it. Globalisation may be facilitating a ‘changing geography’ of traditional social relations but those relations cannot be reduced to the economic. Nor can complex issues of power and identity ever be resolved by jobs or handouts alone. Furthermore, in its arguments about the impact of globalisation, Labor risks taking on an analysis of change at the turn of the twenty-first century which, as Massey points out, derives its coherence partly from the point of view of pre-existing (relative) privilege.

One of the Keating government’s important legacies, however flawed, was its attempt to develop a more inclusive conception of the Australian citizen. However, some Labor commentators’ emphases on economics are leading them to move away from Keating’s perspectives. For example, Mark Latham argues that the 1996 election result shows that categories should not be disconnected from socio-economic circumstances since ‘Labor’s starting point must be socio-economic status and capability; not a loose assumption that people sharing a specific characteristic also share the same access to economic and social resources’. Latham singles out government programs in respect to race and
gender for critical mention. A number of other Labor commentators also suggest that Labor lost the 1996 election because it neglected the mainstream and privileged special interest groups. Jennie George has been sufficiently concerned by such arguments to state that:

we should reject the view promoted by former ministers such as Gary Johns who suggest that Labor lost the election because it had been listening to “minorities” rather than the “mainstream”. It was not feminists nor Aboriginal advocates, nor environmentalists who were promoting the virtues of economic rationalism.

One could add that it was also Labor policies, and Labor forms of economic reductionism, that resulted in multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism becoming identified with international market forces, economic deregulation and opening up the economy to foreign competition.

Conclusion

‘Revenge of the mainstream’ discourse played an important role in Howard’s 1996 election campaign but also, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, set the parameters for much that happened in the Howard government’s subsequent terms in office. The government’s asserted affinity with the ‘mainstream’ would be used to justify Howard’s position on issues ranging from social welfare reform to the monarchy. More importantly, many of the problems which came to dog the Howard government’s first term in office were there from the start. A government which had already argued that racial and ethnic ‘special interests’ had received excessive benefits under the Labor government, and which sought to shore up anglo-celtic and European privilege, would have trouble intervening effectively against Pauline Hanson’s similar, but more extreme, arguments. As Howard has admitted, he was partly drawing on Hanson’s constituency for support. Constructing unions as a ‘special interest’ would contribute to the waterfront debacle as the government attempted to contain union power on the wharves and, more generally, through its industrial relations legislation. Constructing Aboriginal groups as a ‘special interest’ would contribute to the exclusion of Aboriginal organisations from the final round of the Wik negotiations.

In general, the government’s construction of the mainstream and ‘special interests’ would lead to a range of budget cuts to social groups ranging from Aboriginal to ethnic to feminist organisations. The conservative rhetoric regarding the ‘mainstream’ had the potential to alienate diverse social groups. The politics of identity has therefore played a central role in both the political discourse and policy formation of the Labor and Liberal governments. The following chapter will analyse the politics of identity in more depth, drawing on a range of existing Australian analyses and useful theoretical and analytical frameworks.
Endnotes

3 Liberal/National, Future Directions, p 15.
4 Liberal/National, Future Directions, pp 9-11.
5 Liberal/National, Future Directions, pp 89-93.
7 John Howard, leader of the opposition, ‘A competitive Australia: The government’s role in generating the conditions to make Australia a better place to do business and create jobs’, July 1995, typescript, p 1.
14 See e.g. Lauchlan Chipman, ‘The menace of multi-culturalism’, Quadrant, October 1980, p 4, where he talks of ‘several mainstream sets of Australian socio-economic and cultural norms’.
17 Cited in Kelly, The End of Certainty, p 424.

19 Australian, 3 April 1996. See further Weekend Australian, 29-30 June 1996, for Howard’s argument that Senator Herron had been the victim of political correctness. For an analysis that disputes the prevalence of so-called political correctness, see McKenzie Wark, ‘Free speech, cheap talk and the virtual republic’ in Phillip Adams (ed.), The Retreat from Tolerance, ABC Sydney, 1997, pp 162-187.


26 Howard claims that this phrase was one he had not given much thought to prior to uttering it in an interview. Media transcript, John Howard, address to Australia Day Council’s Australia Day luncheon, Darling Harbour, Sydney, 24 January 1997, typescript, p 1.


28 Cuts to women’s organisations are detailed in chapter five but included a 38% cut to the Office of the Status of Women and its staff being reduced from 48-31.

29 Howard, transcript of radio interview with Alan Jones, Radio 2UE, 2 May 1997. For details of initial budget cuts to ATSIC and Aboriginal programmes, see Budget Statements 1996-97, Budget Paper No 1, AGPS, Canberra, 1996, pp 3-120, 3-18. There were subsequently some increases in programme areas such as Aboriginal health. See eg. Addressing Priorities in Indigenous Affairs, statement by Senator the Honourable John Herron, minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, 12 May 1998, Canberra: AGPS, 1998, p 3 and p 6 and Herron’s media release of 12 May 1999.


31 Australian, 9 April 1998.


33 Advertiser, 5 March 1997. Senator Newman is also a strong supporter of Liberal policies of ‘mainstreaming’ women’s policy - an issue that will be discussed in chapter five, Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend, 8 March 1997.


44 Howard, address to the Chinese Australian Forum, p 1.


51 *Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend Magazine*, 15 June 1996.

52 ‘Howard’s way’, p 32. It is also noteworthy that one of Howard’s speechwriters at the time of the 1996 election was openly gay.


55 See eg. footnote 29 and further documentation in subsequent chapters.


Keating, ‘For the new Australia’, pp 2, 5 and 8.


The previous chapters have addressed a number of elements in Australian government discourse. However, the politics of identity has emerged as one of the central issues. This chapter will use a number of theoretical and analytical approaches to throw more light on the role of discourses of identity. I use the phrase ‘politics of identity’ rather than ‘identity politics’ because the latter term is often used to refer to issues of recognition, inclusion and exclusion raised by groups such as the feminist movement, ethnic and racial groups and gays and lesbians. Therefore, the term ‘identity politics’ tends to play down or neglect the politics of identity of powerful groups. It also neglects the constitution of related identities such as ‘national’ identity or ‘whiteness’. Yet, the last chapter stressed that the politics of identity is just as much about discourses that shore up the privileged identity of powerful groups as it is about resistance by marginalised groups. Even the Labor government’s politics of inclusion still privileged particular forms of economic identity. The term ‘politics of identity’ is therefore used in this book as a way of signalling a concern with broader issues of identity.

It will be argued in this chapter that a range of theoretical and analytical frameworks helps to explain the crucial role which identity plays in political discourse. Existing frameworks often usefully identify key issues of concern to government. However, discussion of these frameworks needs to be developed further in order to allow for government responses to the challenges facing traditional discourses on identity. The chapter will begin with a consideration of the theoretical and analytical implications of the arguments discussed in the last chapter before proceeding to a discussion of other relevant issues.

**Outsider groups, difference and analyses of identity**

At first sight, the account of Howard government discourse given in the last chapter seems to fit existing analyses of identity formation in obvious ways. The discourse of the Liberal government appears to be merely affirming ‘mainstream’ identity by naming ‘outsider’ groups. Such a move would not be unusual since a number of analyses draw attention to the role of political discourse in constructing the traditional identity of the liberal individual — most commonly depicted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a white, male, property-
owning, heterosexual head of a family. From the beginning therefore, the
discursive constitution of the liberal individual involved a process of exclusion
as well as inclusion. The abstract individual of liberalism was never really
abstract at all. In a keynote address given to the Australasian Political Studies
Association Annual Conference in September 1995, American political theorist,
Jane Flax argued that ‘the freedom, homogeneity, autonomy and identity of the
modern individual are produced by and dependent upon its marked other: the
slave, the inferior races, the homosexual’. She goes on to argue that ‘since
these marked and marginalised others are intrinsic to its constitution, the
domination of certain forms of subjectivity depends upon reproducing them as
deviant outsiders’. Similarly, Joan Scott criticises the assumption ‘that people
are discriminated against because they are already different, when, in fact, I
would argue, it is the other way around’. In her view: ‘difference and the
salience of different identities are produced by discrimination, a process that
establishes the superiority or the typicality or the universality of some in terms
of the inferiority or atypicality or particularity of others’. In other words, both
Flax and Scott are describing situations in which the mainstream is being affirmed
by marginalising or excluding others.

Flax’s and Scott’s statements provide useful accounts of how, traditionally,
the liberal individual was discursively constituted. However, their analyses do
not allow adequately for late twentieth century contestations of the constitution
of the liberal individual. In particular, we would need to revise and develop their
analyses if we were to understand what was happening during the Keating
period, the period of the politics of inclusion. For neither Flax’s nor Scott’s
analyses seem to adequately anticipate a politics in which a right-wing government
attempts to discursively construct a wide range of (previously marginalised)
identities in ways that are compatible with right-wing economic and political
agendas. Furthermore, while Flax’s and Scott’s analyses seem far more apt
for explaining what is happening under the Howard government, they cannot
fully explain the aftermath of a period of incorporation. Under the Howard
government, group identities which began to be incorporated into mainstream
citizen identity under Labor are being expunged and once again constructed as
special interests. In other words, their analyses do not anticipate a politics of
the ‘mainstream’ that relies partly on denying the legitimate existence of special
interests, rather than necessarily reinforcing the construction of outsider groups.

Scott’s and Flax’s analyses also do not adequately explain the assimilationist
nature of some of the revenge of the mainstream discourse. An example is
Pauline Hanson’s statement that ‘abolishing the policy of multiculturalism will
save billions of dollars and allow those from ethnic backgrounds to join
mainstream Australia, paving the way to a strong, united country’. As was
pointed out in the last chapter, this is where one also needs to be particularly
careful in terms of how one reads Howard’s statements in support of racial
equality and tolerance, since they can deny racial difference, rather than affirm it. Howard's statements against racial intolerance and stereotypes are often a two-edged sword that can be used against those arguing, for example, for Aboriginal land rights, just as much as they can be used against whites making racially derogatory remarks. In Howard's view, proponents of 'special interests' are probably far more guilty of spreading divisiveness than he is with his privileging of 'mainstream Australia'.

While focuses on difference and the production of outsider groups have been very productive in social theory, more attention needs to be paid, I'd suggest, to the way in which 'mainstream' identities are constructed and to the role in this process of forms of incorporation and/or assimilation that deny group identities. In other words, and partly contra Flax and Scott, the 'mainstream' can be constituted just as much by a process of inclusion or assimilation as exclusion. It is a new form of universalism. Indeed, for the Howard government, reconstituting the central importance of rational economic man involves breaking down other identities in an attempt to reconstitute the abstract (universal) individual who appears not to be gendered or racially inscribed. However, in the process, the government is actually privileging particular 'mainstream' identities. Explicitly constructing outsider groups, or acknowledging special interests as legitimate groups, would be an admission of both the specific location of the 'abstract' individual and the identity of the mainstream. In other words, the privileging of certain identities is being established through a sleight of hand which denies the legitimacy of difference. It is not being primarily established through a process of explicitly constituting racial or gender difference, but rather through holding out the possibility of assimilation into a privileged form of identity. In this view, only the perverse or self-serving (e.g. members of the Aboriginal 'industry') would wish to retain an identity outside of the mainstream.

The above analysis also suggests that we need to go beyond those analyses of difference which assume that the meaning of a category derives from the construction of another category to which it is opposed. Drawing on linguists such as Saussure, such analyses emphasise the importance of dichotomous categories such as black/white, self/other, heterosexual/homosexual and the consequent construction of insider/outside groups. Consequently, they also advocate the deconstruction of dichotomous categories as a strategy for subverting existing power relations, for example, those queer theorists who seek to undermine the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual identity by critiquing fixed sexual categories and emphasising the fluidity of desire. However, as we have seen in the preceding discussion of strategies of inclusion and assimilation, the construction of categories in conservative political discourse can be more complex than dichotomous theories would tend to allow. Forms of linguistic reductionism cannot adequately explain the complex negotiations of power and difference that are happening here. For example, both conservative
and subversive/deconstructive strategies can, in their very different ways, seek to dissolve dichotomies of difference. It is necessary to address both the politics of ‘mainstream’ and marginal identity. As a result, backlash politics such as the ‘revenge of the mainstream’ cannot just be seen as a response to the distribution of resources to marginal groups, although that is part of the issue. Backlash politics also needs to be seen as a response to challenges to the constitution of privileged identity groups.

**Fragmentation of identity**

The arguments regarding Labor’s policy of inclusiveness and the Liberals’ construction of the mainstream also have relevance for a number of other theories of the relationship between discourse, ideology and identity. For example, it is commonly argued by theorists ranging from Zygmunt Bauman to Deleuze and Guattari, that contemporary identity is characterised by increasing fragmentation.9 It is suggested that the previously unified citizen-subject of liberal ideology has fragmented into diverse identities based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, various sub-cultures and even consumer style. Sociologists such as Giddens argue that identity is increasingly a matter for self-reflexivity, as traditional, fixed identities decline and individuals increasingly create their own identity.10 Such analyses have some points. For example, the unproblematic construction of a unified liberal citizen subject as a white male head of a familial household has indeed been under increasing challenge in the twentieth century, just as the construction of the liberal citizen as a property-owning male was under increasing challenge in the nineteenth century as the working classes demanded the benefits of social and economic citizenship.

However, in order to understand the relationship between the politics of identity and Australian government discourse, it is necessary to realise that governments have responded to such challenges by attempting to reconstruct the liberal citizen subject in more complex forms. For example, liberal narratives attempt to construct common economic interests which, it is argued, the vast majority of the population share. Both Labor and Liberal governments have attempted to do that in their different ways, Labor through its conception of group, co-operative capitalism, the Liberals through re-asserting the abstract, self-reliant individual. Labor’s strategy responded to potential problems of fragmentation by incorporating previously marginalised group identities into national economic identity, stressing common economic interests which all groups shared. The Liberals’ strategy responds to the challenges of fragmentation by requiring individuals to subordinate any group identity to ‘mainstream’ economic and social identity. The ‘revenge of the mainstream’ is a retrospective challenge to the attempted inclusion, as opposed to assimilation, of marginalised groups. Inclusion valued diverse group identities in a way that assimilation did not.
Above all, we need to have a more sophisticated understanding of what underlies the phenomenon conveniently characterised as late twentieth century ‘fragmentation’. It is worth remembering that ‘other’ identities have been around for a very long time. From the point of view of the ‘other’ it was not so much that the ‘mainstream’ became fragmented but that ‘other’ identities, previously defined as outside of the ‘mainstream’, wished to be part of it rather than be excluded or lose their identities through assimilation. The traditional ‘mainstream’ may sometimes experience this belated recognition of pre-existing identities as fragmentation, or the favouring of special interests, but that is not necessarily the point of view of the ‘other’. For example, to an Aboriginal person excluded from citizenship and thereby the construction of the liberal individual, acknowledging them as citizens in their own right would hardly seem to be a process of fragmentation. The same is true for women who are now acknowledged as political and economic actors in their own right, rather than as someone’s daughter or wife. It is predominantly from the point of view of the white, male, heterosexual citizen, no longer identified as the citizen, that recognising the legitimacy of other group identities on the basis of gender, race or sexuality could appear to be a process of fragmentation of a previously unified subject.

If you are looking at Australian government discourse, therefore, comments made by some of the theorists of fragmentation seem particularly in need of revision and development. Consider, for example, Zygmunt Bauman’s view that ‘the snag is no longer how to discover, invent, construct, assemble (even buy) an identity, but how to prevent it from sticking. Well constructed and durable identity turns from an asset into a liability. The hub of postmodern life strategy is not identity building, but avoidance of fixation’. Such views may have some relevance for issues of consumption and transitory personal style. However, they throw little light on the highly contested terrains of ‘mainstream’, ‘economic’ and ‘national’ identity. There, the battles are still very much about the fixation of identity in various forms. Furthermore, governments are attempting to mediate between policy discourse and everyday life.

(Contradictory) identifications, government discourse and everyday life

Stuart Hall, in particular, has drawn attention to the ways in which discourse about identity is electorally significant in terms of people’s conceptions of their everyday present and future:

Electoral politics — in fact, every kind of politics — depends on political identities and identifications. People make identifications symbolically: through social imagery, in their political imaginations. They ‘see themselves’ as one sort of
person or another. They ‘imagine their future’ within this scenario or that. They don’t just think about voting in terms of how much they have, their so-called ‘material interests’. Material interests matter profoundly. But they are always ideologically defined.\footnote{12}

Although he is writing in the British context, Hall’s argument helps to explain why Australian politicians have made such substantial use of debates about identity as a way, not only of building electoral support, but of meaningfully linking party policy with everyday life. Hall went on to develop some astute analyses of British politics, particularly during the Thatcher period. While he provides some insights that are useful for an analysis of Australian political culture, other insights are helpful more in terms of drawing attention to salient differences.

The British analyses are particularly good for drawing our attention to Liberal attempts to build an entrepreneurial ‘enterprise culture’ in Australia. However while the Liberals, like Thatcher, can be seen as attempting to develop an enterprise culture based on self-reliant, entrepreneurial individualism, free markets and cuts to the welfare state, other similarities are not so clear.\footnote{13} In particular, Hall has tended to emphasise the contradictory forms of identification encouraged under Thatcherism, suggesting as Franklin, Lury and Stacey explain that ‘one of the strengths of Thatcherism was precisely its ability to offer multiple, adverse and contradictory identifications, thus successfully including within its discourse and narratives many different, even opposed, sets of interests’.

Hawke and Keating did appeal to multiple identifications but, as we have seen, they were not conceived as contradictory. Indeed, the government’s framework was extremely coherent though somewhat simplistic as it attempted to reconcile diverse groups by constructing common economic interests. Prior to the 1996 election, Howard also attempted to appeal to contradictory positioning by, for example, cultivating ethnic groups and being particularly vague about who constituted the ‘mainstream’ or ‘special interests’. However, since the 1996 election Howard has positively discouraged multiple identifications through his attack on special interests and his rejection of group categories. Howard’s personal appeal lies much more in forms of narrative and historical closure that are designed to reassure in times of great change. This is not to deny that, along with its appeals to multiplicity, Thatcherism also had its ‘revenge’ elements — debates over immigration, attacks on the Greater London Council’s support for social diversity and attempts to outlaw the so-called ‘promotion’ of homosexuality through Section 28 are examples that spring to mind. However, the point is that Thatcherism’s social agenda, particularly its politics of identity, was far more complex, and contradictory, than Howard’s.

Other British analyses also read strangely to Australian eyes. If Hall had studied Australian Labor’s attempts to reconstruct Australian capitalism, would he have written quite so confidently of British Labour that: ‘In its profound
empiricism, [Labour] ... has mistaken adaptation to the present as progress towards the future. In fact, realistically, Labour can never adapt enough to become the “natural inheritor” of capitalism'. Australian Labor had considerable success depicting itself as the inheritor of capitalism, a tradition on which Tony Blair has been glad to build. Nor do Hall’s arguments that Thatcherism drew on popular culture by targeting people’s identity as consumers always gel with the Australian experience. Certainly, Australian Labor promised abundant future economic growth but, for several years of Labor’s period in office, the government consciously restrained consumption in order to assist Australia’s balance of payments crisis. Consumer identity was not the crucial ‘common’ economic identity in Australian political discourse during the Labor period but it has tended to emerge as a sub-text in Howard government arguments about consumer choice for government ‘clients’. So, for example, the unemployed are now encouraged to choose from a range of private sector job agencies which have replaced many of the functions of the former government job agency.

Queer theory and identity

Further insights into the politics of identity can be drawn from queer theory. Queer theory originally grew out of an engagement with analyses of the constitution of sexual identities and is generally characterised by its attempts to undermine the ‘fixing’ of sexual identities, for example, as heterosexual, gay or lesbian. Instead, queer theory draws attention to the intersections and criss-crossings of multiple and complex sexual identifications and behaviours. Queer analyses of the way in which the liberal subject is constructed as heterosexual will be discussed in the next chapter. The current discussion will focus on aspects of queer theory that are particularly relevant to the politics of identity and constructions of the mainstream in respect to marginalised groups. Both Judith Butler and Cindy Patton have tried to tackle the difficult issue of what to do about problematic identity politics in periods of right-wing backlash. Both have argued that, while one needs to be aware of the problems of exclusion that occur in any attempt to ‘fix’ identity, nonetheless one may need to use identity categories strategically. In Butler’s words: ‘In the face of the prospective silencing or erasure of gender, race or sexual minority identities by reactionary political forces, it is important to be able to articulate them, and to insist on these identities as sites of valuable cultural contest.’

Both Patton and Butler tend to see identity politics in terms of claims for minority rights, which gives rise to some of their reservations. Butler argues that ‘what we call identity politics is produced by a state which can only allocate recognition and rights to objects totalized by the particularity that constitutes their plaintiff status’. Patton places a similar emphasis on gay identity as a
plaintiff status, arguing that ‘postmodern mini-narratives of individual and collective moral legitimacy are replacing the rational metanarratives ... that characterized state legitimation in modernity’. However, what is most interesting about the Australian experience is the way in which the Labor government attempted to incorporate marginalised identities into ‘mainstream’ economic discourse. The Howard government was not just responding negatively to Labor’s discourse about minority rights, which the Liberal government’s construction of ‘special interests’ partially disallows, but to Labor’s implicit reconstitution of the ‘mainstream’. Similarly, the Howard government’s metanarratives about the ‘mainstream’ and economic liberalism seem to be alive and well. One could argue that the neglect of the enormously effective but indirect marginalisation produced by constructions of ‘mainstream’ identity, is also a problem in Butler’s analysis of hate speech which concentrates on the vilification of marginalised groups. The politics of identity is just as much about the construction of powerful, majority and ‘mainstream’ identities as it is about marginalised and less powerful ones. Howard has not simply discovered the ‘mainstream’, he is helping to create it.

The politics of recognition versus the politics of redistribution

The above analysis makes it clear that the politics of identity cannot properly be constructed, as many debates do, in terms of struggles for ‘recognition’ of difference rather than for ‘redistribution’; in other words, as struggles over ‘the cultural’ rather than the ‘material’; or as struggles based on a claimed ‘victimhood’. For a start, a clear division between the ‘material’ and the ‘cultural’ is extremely difficult to achieve given that both Labor and Liberal governments have attempted to construct identity categories in ways that are compatible with their economic views. Nor does the division between ‘recognition’ and redistribution work any better. Struggles over land rights are just one example of a situation where the privileging of particular (white) racial identities is closely interconnected with issues of distribution as well as recognition. Nor, as Nancy Fraser has suggested, does the backlash against identity politics derive primarily from marginalised groups such as women utilising ‘recognition’ strategies such as affirmative action that result in endlessly repeated requests for ‘more’ since they leave underlying forms of economic mal-distribution intact. In Fraser’s view, affirmative action strategies risk engendering ‘injustices of recognition’ since groups can appear to be beneficiaries of ‘special treatment and undeserved largesse’. Once the politics of identity of so-called ‘mainstream’ as well as marginalised groups is taken into account, it becomes clear that the backlash, or ‘revenge’, is generated both by battles over resources and by real challenges to the power relations that privilege particular forms of
identity. The politics of identity is just as much about challenges to power, and the responses to those challenges, as it is about ‘victimhood’.

**Culture wars and ‘identity packages’**

It is this story about the construction of privileged forms of identity that also underlies Australia’s ‘culture wars’, as the various debates over ‘political correctness’ and the politics of identity have sometimes been termed. Cultural critics such as McKenzie Wark and Mark Davis have analysed the class, gender and generational privileges being reasserted in many of the debates in media and literary circles. The same is the case for the culture wars occurring in government and political party discourse.

Yet, the role of privileged identities is not always adequately recognised in analyses of Australian identity politics. In her study of *The Imaginary Australian: Anglo-Celts and Identity — 1788 to the Present*, Miriam Dixson argues that Anglo-celtic ‘core culture’ should play an important role in holding Australian identity together and preventing excessive fragmentation. In the process, she endorses contentious arguments that ‘organised interest groups’ bypassed traditional parties to assert themselves during the Keating period and talks of ‘mourning’ by ‘mainstream’ anglo-celtic Australians due to increasing ethnic diversity and rapid political and economic change. In short, some of her terminology sounds similar to Howard’s arguments, despite her own support for a ‘richly diverse’ Australia. Yet Dixson does not address the extent to which many of the concepts she endorses have been used to privilege anglo-celtic identity, rather than core anglo-celtic culture being used, as she wishes, to hold together diverse Australian identities, including indigenous and ‘new ethnic’ ones.

Similarly, in his critique of Keating’s various national identity ‘packages’, as he terms them, Gregory Melleuish neglects the Liberals’ own identity ‘packages’. Howard’s views on political correctness, ‘special interests’ and so on are depicted as part of the resistance to identity ‘packages’, exemplified by the ‘culture wars’, rather than themselves constituting a reassertion of a more traditional identity ‘package’. Melleuish also argues that 1890s issues such as ‘the struggle of labour and capital’ have been replaced by struggles over identity packages in the 1990’s. In short, he implies that class is no longer a significant issue in fights over identity. However, it was argued in chapter two that the Hawke and Keating governments attempted to reshape Australian employee and employer identity in order to encourage the development of a cooperative capitalism. In the process, workers were no longer conceived as white, blue-collar males. Rather, highly trained and flexible workers of both sexes, from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds, and working in a variety of sectors, would co-operate together to build a competitive, technologically advanced and extremely profitable twenty-first century Australian capitalist...
society. The Labor governments’ cultivation of the ‘middle class’, their emphasis on harmony and consensus between employer and employee, and their cultivation of business links, have indeed encouraged the decline of specific discourses of class that were based on ideas of class antagonism. Nonetheless, the continued importance of class was still evident in their emphasis on the importance of trade unions and business organisations (that is representatives of capital and labour), evident in their use of tripartite government, business and union economic advisory structures. Class, including a conception of labour and capital, was still very much in evidence as an implicit category, even if more explicit references declined. The Liberal government’s industrial relations legislation also attempts to encourage the development of a new form of working class identity - one that decries union solidarity in favour of negotiating individual contracts. Unlike Labor, Howard’s vision is one of individuals co-operating with their own employers rather than unions co-operating with employers and business organisations. Liberal and Labor pitches to ‘the battlers’ are also a recognition of the continued importance of class.

However, the ‘revenge of the mainstream’ discourse also has an implicit argument about class harmony. In this populist version, the major social division is not between labour and capital but between a class-inclusive ‘mainstream’ of ‘ordinary Australians’ and the ‘elites’. This is an issue that has been raised in a number of books in recent years, including Michael Thompson’s critique of the Labor Party and Katharine Betts’ critique of immigration policy. However, given that this book focuses on government discourse, let us consider a key quotation from John Howard:

You’ve read the book, The Revolt of the Elites, haven’t you? It was written by Christopher Lasch, an American social commentator. His theory is - and I think he’s right and I certainly find it here in Australia - that a lot of, for want of a better expression, mainstream people resent the fact that there’s a bit of a political elite which includes a lot of people in the press who, in effect, are saying there are certain issues that you, the public, are too stupid to be trusted to even talk about. We’ll decide it for you and we’ll tell you what’s good. A lot of Australians feel that issues related to immigration and multiculturalism fall into that category.

Howard’s version does not do full justice to Lasch’s arguments and leaves out more left-wing aspects of Lasch’s views, for example, his dislike of excessive class inequality. Howard would also disagree with Lasch’s argument that globalisation has contributed to the growth of a cosmopolitan business, professional and cultural elite that has no loyalty to its own country and dismissive attitudes towards the bulk of the citizenry. The latter argument has been a seductive one that has been taken up in much populist rhetoric. Lasch is cited glowingly, for example, by a contributor to Pauline Hanson’s book, The Truth. Nonetheless, both Howard and Lasch depict the ‘culture wars’ over identity as
a battle between elites and ordinary people. In fact, it is groups that are marginalised and disadvantaged in Australian society, rather than elites, that have raised issues of social justice, inclusiveness and equality, often while complaining about the racial, ethnic and gender composition of those in power in the private and public sectors. Yet, in Howard’s rhetoric, movements and organisations advocating social justice become ‘industries’ and ‘special interests’ supporting an elite of professional advocates and activists. It was indicated in the last chapter that such rhetoric only really works if there is an implicit, but never to be explicitly spelt out, assumption that ordinary Australians are not Aboriginal, Asian, homosexual, lesbian, feminist or migrant.

Indeed, it is fascinating how much of the American debate has been imported into Australia with scant regard for differences between Australian and American cultures. A number of books have debunked conservative American accounts of political correctness and the ‘culture wars’, arguing that they are based on incorrect or greatly distorted information. However, the conservative American perspectives seem even less appropriate for a country where the term ‘political correctness’ was not even used prior to its importation via the American Right and where, for example, numerical affirmative action quotas had never been introduced.

The inappropriateness of applying American analyses to Australia is highlighted by Robert Hughes’ work, given his joint status as expatriate Australian and American cultural critic. Hughes has criticised what he sees as an American ‘culture of complaint’ that encourages citizens to articulate their rights in terms of victimhood. He has lambasted the excesses of ‘political correctness’ and what he sees as the dissolution of common citizenship and consensus but he has distanced himself from the Howard backlash. Far from endorsing Howard’s politics, Hughes has described the prime minister as a ‘visionary with eyes in the back of his head’. This is not surprising given that, for example, Hughes was generally laudatory of inclusive Australian forms of multiculturalism, and government support for them, while criticising what he saw as some of the separatist excesses of American ‘multi-culti and its discontents’.

One could also argue that the American debates are particularly inappropriate for characterising the Keating big picture which, for all its faults and simplistic formulae, did attempt to incorporate the vast mass of the Australian people into a project for national transformation. Keating’s vision did not despise the Australian population, in an elitist way. On the contrary it saw the Australian population as itself being cosmopolitan, multicultural, tolerant and inclusive. A sign of the inappropriateness of much American analysis of the ‘culture wars’ is evident when one contrasts Keating’s approach with Todd Gitlin’s (left-wing and sometimes class reductionist) lament for the decline of ‘common dreams’:
What has become of the ideal of a left — or, for that matter, of a nation — that federates people of different races, genders, sexualities, or for that matter, religions and classes? Why has this ideal been neglected or abandoned by so many of the poor and minorities who should share the left’s ideal of equality? Why insist on difference with such rigidity, rancor, and blindness, to the exclusion of the possibility of common knowledge and common dreams? Keating’s vision incorporated difference in ways of which Gitlin would probably not approve, given his distrust both of identity politics and corporate capitalism. Nonetheless, Keating’s big picture was an attempt to articulate a new Labor version of a common dream. Once again, Australian political discourse was addressing some pervasive problems in international political discourse, but developing different outcomes.

Conclusion

The politics of identity, in its various forms, has been a crucial issue in Australian government discourse. Nonetheless, the discussion in this chapter has drawn attention to the need to be cautious about simplistically applying existing theories and analyses of identity to the study of Australian government discourse. Those analyses are often better at identifying problems than at predicting the outcomes of government engagements with them. Many theories of identity would lead us to expect a political discourse that revealed a fragmentation of identity, construction of ‘outsider groups’ and contradictory identifications. Australian government discourse has indeed been addressing the challenges that a plurality of identities poses for the citizen subject of traditional liberalism. However, Australian governments have responded to late twentieth century issues such as fragmentation and multiple identifications by developing new discourses of inclusion or assimilation. In their various ways, Australian governments are attempting to incorporate or assimilate difference into coherent conceptions of the Australian citizenry. The next chapter will explore some of these issues in more depth by addressing a specific form of identity, namely, the politics of gender identity.

Endnotes

1 See eg. the discussion of Butler and Patton later in this chapter.
Pateman has drawn attention to both the gendered and racial characteristics in *The Sexual Contract*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988. Although Pateman doesn’t make this point, the married status of the male liberal head of household also involved a predominantly heterosexual identity.


7 see eg. Howard’s equal treatment justification of his Wik legislation, transcript, interview with Matt Peacock, ABC Radio, AM, 30 June 1998.


23 In *The Power of Identity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, vol 2 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Manuel Castells deals with a wide range of social movement reactions to identity politics from fundamentalist Christians, to militia groups, to Zapatistas but says relatively little about governments’ own mobilisation of identity politics, partly because his emphasis is on the ways in which the legitimacy of governments is being undermined and challenged.


So Thompson can write that the contemporary working class are people who ‘believe in equality of opportunity. They share their suburbs and jobs with migrants’, Labor Without Class, p 95. Or Katharine Betts can assert (without any adequate evidence) that the new class’s support for cosmopolitanism comes from a status-driven desire to distance themselves from lower class Australians, The Great Divide, pp 191, 301, 320. Thompson and Betts both write as though the working class doesn’t have a diverse ethnic composition. Aren’t Thompson’s migrants part of the working class?


See McKenzie Wark’s critique of political correctness debates in chapter six of his book, The Virtual Republic.


Cited by Bob Baldwin, Member for Paterson, Australian House of Representatives, Hansard, 2 December 1996, p 7439.

Robert Hughes, Culture of Complaint, pp 83-9.


Chapter Five

Gender and Australian Political Discourse

As pointed out in the introduction to this book, the constitution of the liberal citizen has been a key political issue in late twentieth century political discourse. Feminist theory has made some particularly important contributions by analysing the ways in which ideologies such as liberalism constitute citizens as gendered political subjects. This chapter draws on approaches from feminism and queer theory to analyse the ways in which governments have interpreted and responded to the challenges posed by changing gender relations. It begins by outlining feminist analyses of the gendered constitution of the subject in traditional liberal theory and argues that similar constructions can be found in Australian political discourse. It then moves on to a more general analysis of the changes in the gendered nature of Australian political debate and policy formation.

Gender and traditional liberal political theory

As Susan Moller Okin documented in an early groundbreaking study, the fathers of modern liberalism tended to construct the citizen as a male head of household. Women were not seen as citizens in their own right. Their role was seen to be largely confined to the private sphere of the family and they were marginalised from public, political and economic life. Carole Pateman has drawn particular attention to the role played by the marriage contract, arguing that the mythical social contract, in which male citizens agree to give up certain individual and collective powers to government, was indissolubly intertwined with another contract, the marriage contract, in which women were subordinated to their husbands. The marriage contract also had implications for the wage contract, in which the employee tended to be constructed as a male head of household.

While Wendy Brown, amongst others, has argued that Pateman’s analysis of the crucial role of contract is not central to modern forms of liberalism, there is a general feminist consensus that the liberal civil subject is still being constituted in predominantly masculine terms. Brown notes that liberalism simultaneously produces gendered subjects whose differences are seen as natural and abstract individuals who appear to be genderless. Despite its superficial gender neutrality, the abstract and autonomous liberal individual is gendered masculine in crucial ways. Gendered dualisms associate categories such as self-interest with the masculine, and selflessness with the feminine. As well, the ‘autonomous’
individual is a ‘fantastic’ figure, given that he is in reality dependent upon women’s domestic support.\textsuperscript{5} Anne Phillips has put this point another way when she argues that there is no gender neutral individual given that the conception of the individual is based on a male norm: ‘Liberal democracy wants to ignore (and civic republicanism to transcend) all more local identities and difference; in reality both traditions have insinuated the male body and male identity into their definitions of the norm’.\textsuperscript{6}

Furthermore, the normalising discourses at work are very complex. It is not just that the conception of the citizen has tended, traditionally, to be constructed around a male norm but, also, as queer theorists, amongst others, have pointed out, they are generally heteronormative. There are particular (fixed) constructions of masculinity, femininity and sexuality being privileged here.\textsuperscript{7} The latter should not surprise us given queer theorist Michael Warner’s ambitious claim that ‘themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture’.\textsuperscript{8} A range of subordinate identities are also being constructed, for example through the state and juridical recognition of plaintiff identities, as women’s or gay groups demand protection, entitlements or services.\textsuperscript{9}

It will be argued in this chapter that an analysis of the variants of liberal ideology propagated by the Hawke/Keating Labor governments and the Howard Liberal governments in government statements and policy documents, still reveals many of the tensions present in traditional liberalism’s constitution of the gendered subject. However, it will also be argued that these constructions are changing. Contemporary liberal political discourse has proved to be particularly flexible and varied — indeed, more flexible and varied than some of the feminist theorists cited above suggest.

\textbf{Gender in Australian political discourse}

Australia has an admirably long history of recognising women’s formal political rights to vote and to stand for parliament.\textsuperscript{10} However, one does not need to go very far back in Australian political history to find examples of views which privileged conceptions of the citizen as male head of household. For example, in the 1940’s, Labor Prime Minister Curtin asserted that ‘the natural urge for motherhood, husband and home is the great motivating force in a woman’s life.’\textsuperscript{11} The legacy of such views extended well into the seventies. In his notorious 1970 maiden speech, Paul Keating expressed his dismay at the increasing number of wage-working wives.\textsuperscript{12} However, Keating’s views were already out of touch with much Labor thinking. Just five years later Gough Whitlam attacked ‘the deeply ingrained assumption that women are here to serve and assist’ and apologised for speaking on behalf of ‘a male dominated Party in a male dominated Parliament in a male dominated Society.’\textsuperscript{13}
The contrast between Whitlam's statements and those of Curtin and (the young) Keating serve to illustrate the enormous changes that have taken place in Australian politics (as, indeed, they have internationally) — changes that were partly related to the growing influence of the women's movement.\textsuperscript{14} In addition, the increasing need for women's labour in the Australian economy was changing women's role and government attitudes to it. Women were beginning to be recognised as full political and economic citizens.

**Gender and Australian political discourse in the Hawke and Keating period**

The Hawke and Keating Labor governments emphasised that women were needed in the economy from a relatively early stage in office. The *Australian Women's Employment Strategy* emphasised that 'in order to become economically competitive, the Australian economy needs to utilise fully the abilities and skills of its total labour force, women and men.'\textsuperscript{15} It was recognised that women had been discriminated against and that affirmative action policies were necessary in order to ensure that the contribution of women would be utilised fully. Political and economic agendas were being reconceived. For example, Keating argued that 'it is time that child care was included amongst our mainstream economic issues' since adequate child care needed to be provided in order to ensure women's participation in the economy.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, the Keating government tended to emphasise the importance of part-time jobs for women, particularly married women with children, in an economy in which traditional areas of male full-time employment were in decline.\textsuperscript{17} The Green and White Papers on Full Employment advocated that the government should move beyond traditional liberal conceptions which saw the citizen (and social security beneficiary) as the male head of household. Rather, women should be encouraged to take up part-time work to provide financial support for the family and unemployed male wage earners.\textsuperscript{18}

Women were therefore beginning to be seen as citizens in the public sphere of political and economic life. However, there were still tensions with their role in the private sphere. Part-time work for women facilitated combining work with family responsibilities. There was little suggestion under Keating, as there had been in Hawke government documents, that the high percentage of female part-time employment was an equity problem, and that more should be done to achieve full-time jobs for women.\textsuperscript{19} Keating's statements on child care assume that caring for children is predominantly women's responsibility. He rarely referred to men's parenting, neglecting to mention, for example, whether stay-at-home parents would be eligible for the much-vaunted Home Child Care Allowance.\textsuperscript{20} When referring to women's double-burden, Keating did not suggest that men could undertake more domestic responsibilities in order to lessen
women's load despite precedents set some years earlier by Wendy Fatin, the former Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women. 21

Nonetheless, the government's emphasis on the need for women to be involved in the economy did reflect a commitment to at least partial gender equality. However, it also reflects the firm belief that 'the economic' constructed common interests which, at least to some extent, facilitated the resolution of difference. This view neglected feminist arguments that the governments' economic rationalist policies such as welfare cut-backs would worsen the economic disadvantage of women because of their over representation amongst social welfare beneficiaries (due to longevity, low wages and single parenthood) and their role as carers. 22 There was no real attempt by the government to think about the effects of labour market reform such as enterprise bargaining on traditionally weak, female dominated areas of the workforce. The government's view also failed to address the negative responses that might result from challenges to existing gender power relations, for example, from more traditional men who saw their status as male head of household being under threat.

Above all, there was also little attempt to reconceptualise public accounting to try to calculate the costs of public-sector cut-backs shifting previously publicly provided services to predominantly women's labour in the home, for example, as women had to undertake more caring responsibilities for old, sick or disabled members of the family. Various forms of emotional labour were also not conceived of as work. For practical purposes, the economy was still conceived of in terms that neglected large areas of predominantly female work in the home. 23 In short, the government's economic agendas derived from traditionally male-defined conceptions of economic and social policy, in which women were tacked on without any conception of the need to reconsider the basic models. 24

On the other hand, there was still a significant degree of economic gender incorporation compared with past models and this issue has not been adequately addressed in many feminist analyses of liberalism. For example, Carole Pateman's ground-breaking political theory analysis in The Sexual Contract tends to assume a congruence between capitalism and patriarchy. However, the above analysis of the desire to incorporate female labour in a restructured Australian economy, suggests definite tensions between them. 25 More recent analyses, such as J K Gibson-Graham's analysis in The End of Capitalism (as we knew it), takes a fundamentally different approach from Pateman's. Gibson-Graham attempts to deconstruct all-pervasive conceptions of capitalism, by drawing attention to the tensions between market production and non-commercial forms of home production. However, while it is important to remember that capitalist economic forms are not all powerful and all pervasive, the book does not adequately examine the other side of the equation, namely the role which the capitalist economy can play in incorporating women. 26
Despite such incorporation, the Keating government’s discourse around gender therefore involved only a partial re-working of women’s traditional role in political discourse and policy. Women were both seen as a group that had a tremendous amount to offer in the public sphere of the economy but also as a group that had a special responsibility in the private sphere of domestic life. Similarly, there was only a partial re-working of the masculinity of the citizen subject, as when Keating suggested that in order for ‘us to shape a role for ourselves in the region and the world’ Australia needed to develop an image of Australian masculinity ‘that is both more helpful and much closer to the truth than the lingering stereotypes of gormless men, and shrimps and barbecues’.27 Such outdated images inhibited the tourist trade and cultural exports.28 Ocker versions of heterosexual masculinity may have been challenged but any suggestion that the male subject might be anything other than heterosexual was only hinted at briefly, as in Keating’s rare acknowledgment of ‘the great variety of family forms that exist in Australia today’ including families ‘where one member cares for another who is ... suffering from HIV/AIDS’.29 The Hawke government did introduce procedures that facilitated immigration for gay and lesbian partners. Keating also publicly endorsed the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, emphasising its cultural and economic value.30 However, while the Keating federal government removed much formal discrimination against gays and lesbians in the military it also reneged on a more radical proposal to change definitions of spouse rights for public servants to include same-sex relationships, through fear that it might unleash an electoral backlash.31 The Keating government also rushed to ‘correct’ a clause in the government’s child care rebate bill, when it was acknowledged that it would have included same sex de facto relationships in definitions of the family.32

In short, Labor discourse from this period both reflects changes in the constitution of the citizen-subject of traditional government ideology and policy, and traces of some very old problems and dilemmas in liberal thought such as the relationship between women, the family and the domestic sphere. As we shall see, these tensions are also present in Liberal policy.

Gender and variants of Liberal discourse

It was not only Labor leaders who endorsed the Mardi Gras. Liberal leader John Hewson endorsed the 1994 Mardi Gras — unlike one of his successors, John Howard. However, not surprisingly, Liberal discourse about changing masculinity was very different from that of Labor. Documents such as the 1991 Fightback package contained a none too subtle sub-text privileging a conception of the self-reliant individual as a ‘real’ man, while implying that Labor had been endorsing forms of masculinity which encouraged dependency either on welfare or government business handouts.33 The essence of the
critique of welfare dependency, and the support for self-reliant forms of masculinity, was summed up in *Fightback*'s assertion that ‘an average wage earner is paying about $3,500 a year to support other peoples’ families before he can begin to support his own’. Such rhetoric drew on a long tradition, evident under Thatcherism, for example, of feminising the welfare state. The use of such sub-texts reinforces Wendy Brown’s points, noted earlier, regarding the role of gendered dualisms in political discourse.

Hewson’s discourse also revealed another element in right-wing liberal discourse — claiming tendency to construct the citizen subject in a gender-neutral way. In Hewson’s case, however, this gender-neutrality took the form not of excluding women but of assimilating them into the conception of the entrepreneurial, self-reliant individual who was tough enough to make it in the international market-place, since ‘women can beat men in the most rough and tumble competition’. For Hewson, women ‘are just like us’ — a revealing expression that clearly involved the privileging of a male norm. Consequently, ‘the greatest compliment we can pay the women of Australia — is to treat them exactly the same way as everyone else’, rather than engaging in special treatment based on stereotyped conceptions of disadvantaged groups. Hewson believed that the abstract, self-reliant entrepreneurial individual of *laissez-faire* liberalism could operate as a model for both masculinity and femininity.

By contrast, Howard’s conception of women’s role as citizen is closely related to his conception of the role of the family. The basis of his position on the family was set out most explicitly in the 1998 Coalition Policy document *Future Directions*, which he played a key role in shaping. *Future Directions* painted a scenario in which the family, ‘once the prime source of individual security’ is under attack. Economic pressures have seen more women ‘forced’ into the workplace and there has been a breakdown of those ‘family values which provided the basis for self discipline, personal morality and mutual assistance’. As Judith Brett has pointed out, *Future Directions* worked on the fears of those unable to cope with rapid social change, by ‘seeing the home as an embattled retreat from the world’. The manifesto promised to reverse ‘modern anti-family attitudes’ and provide ‘positive incentives’, including tax reform, to reinforce the family. It blamed the undermining of the family for increasing dependence on government and for escalating youth drug abuse and crime. At the same time, the Coalition claimed that its flexible labour market policies would help women and that the Coalition would make superannuation entitlements more woman-friendly. These elements remain major features of the Howard government’s policy.

Howard’s more recent rhetoric around the family still evokes suggestions that it is a haven from the pressures of an increasingly threatening and changing world. An ideal conception of the family, one that may never be realised in people’s everyday lives, is used to evoke ‘mainstream’, traditional values, security
and certainty. It is not unusual for the family to be used in this way. As Sarah Franklin, Jackie Stacey and Celia Lury point out, such conceptions of the ideal nuclear family played a central role in Thatcherite discourse. Howard still blames the breakdown of this idealised conception of the family for many of the ills of contemporary life including increased welfare dependency. He claims that one of the major causes for poverty and the rise in welfare payments over the last couple of decades has been the substantial increase in family breakdowns and advocates ‘a decisive shift’ towards policies designed to prevent them. This has long been on the Australian right agenda as a cost-saving measure, including under Labor. Support for family (i.e. male breadwinner) provision, rather than welfare, has also influenced government measures to improve women’s access to superannuation by including the superannuation issue in divorce settlements, allowing part-time employees to contribute longer to superannuation funds and allowing better paid partners to have tax deductions when contributing to a low income partner’s superannuation.

It is clear that Howard sees the family as a major non-state welfare institution in society that can provide caring functions, sometimes in place of functions that would previously have been provided by government welfare services. Howard argued in his headland speech, *Fair Australia*, that ‘the family is, and will continue to be, the foundation and most important stabilising influence in our society.’ Furthermore, ‘protecting and strengthening the family unit is the key maintaining social cohesion and economic stability in the future. A stable functioning family provides the best welfare support system yet devised.’ Once again, this is not an unusual argument in the context of right-wing discourse. Janine Brodie has pointed out in the Canadian context that ‘privatisation and welfare cuts often simply mean that social services are shifted from the paid work of women in the public sector to the unpaid labour of women in the domestic sphere.’

Consequently, Kim Beazley has accused Howard of attempting to drive women back into the home. It is often argued that Howard’s position is close to that of the conservative Lyons Forum, a parliamentary group which includes many right-wing Christians, and which he allegedly belonged to prior to becoming Prime Minister. Meanwhile, Anne Summers, a former adviser to Keating on women’s issues, has made a particularly damning attack on Howard’s traditional values.

When it comes to women, as with Aborigines, he would like to lead us back, back to a time when we all accepted uncomplainingly our lot in life and terms like ‘racist’ or ‘sexist’ were utterly superfluous. Maybe this is not surprising coming from a man who has lived most of his life in Wollstonecraft, a suburb of Sydney whose very existence was predicated on a lack of sympathy for improving the status of women. It is, after all, named after the first recorded refugee from feminism. Edward Wollstonecraft fled England for the colonies in order to escape
the notoriety of his aunt, Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, one of the first and most enduring of feminism's texts.\(^51\)

However, despite the assertions by Labor politicians and others, it would be inaccurate to argue that Howard is simply arguing that women should go back to the home. Howard himself has hit out at attempts ‘to stereotype my Government as possessing, as what is described as, an old fashioned attitude towards women.’ He goes on to acknowledge ‘the role of women has changed and we are a richer community as a consequence’.\(^54\) In a classic form of liberal individualism, Howard constructs the problem as one of choice: ‘It is not the role of government to dictate family behaviour. It is not for politicians or bureaucrats to determine how many breadwinners there should be in each family. It is not for government to dictate the choices parents make regarding child care arrangements’.\(^55\) This is part of his general view that ‘the next great responsibility of government is to expand and enhance freedom of individual choice’.\(^56\) On the one hand women are being included as liberal individuals, with freedom of choice, on the other hand the issue is frequently constructed as one of ‘family’ or ‘parental’ choice rather than women’s choice.\(^57\)

The emphasis on ‘choice’ acts as a device which enables the government to deny the operation of disadvantage or power relations. Howard may admit that Aboriginal people are a disadvantaged group in society, but he does not depict women in the same way. For Howard, it is traditional women who wish to stay at home who have been disadvantaged in late twentieth century Australian society, although he doesn’t use that term explicitly. In his view, ‘ultra-feminist groups ... who sort of really demand that every mother be back in the workforce as quickly as humanly possible’ are particularly to blame.\(^58\) Labor pandered to them by introducing tax and welfare measures which, he believes, ‘disadvantage sole income families who have decided that one parent should be at home whilst children are very young.’\(^59\) Howard appears to be including taxation measures which acknowledge the costs involved in earning a (second) income when he makes such statements.

By contrast, the Howard government has supported a number of measures designed to benefit single income families. The Liberal government’s Family Tax Initiative aimed to provide $1 billion dollars per annum to families, particularly those on a low single income, to give additional support to those who wish to stay home to care for children.\(^60\) The government’s 1998 tax package offered excellent benefits to single income families earning above $30,000 per year, with particularly generous benefits going to those earning up to $100,000.\(^61\) The government also aimed to facilitate the possibility of people, predominantly women, being able to care for the old, sick and disabled.\(^62\) Howard does not seem to consider the fact that his own government’s measures are themselves influencing choice. Providing financial incentives for women to stay at home
also involves providing financial disincentives for women to go out to work. The state is once again transferring caring functions to the domestic sphere of women.

However, despite his emphasis on the domestic sphere, Howard proudly cites the prominent role which women have played in Liberal Party history and the achievements of previous Liberal governments in improving the position of women from abolishing the Public Service marriage ban to establishing the National Women’s Advisory Council and signing the UN convention on the elimination of discrimination against women.\(^5\) Howard announced an executive search pilot programme to increase the number of women on government boards and in government agencies while the government is working with the Business Council of Australia to improve the position of women in small business.\(^6\) He was particularly proud of the relatively large number of female Liberal MP's elected at the 1996 election, claiming that ‘we are now twice the world average so far as parliamentary representation for women in democratic parliaments’.\(^7\) Similarly, he argues that he has more women in the total Ministry than Labor ever had.\(^8\) One might wish to quibble with some of these statements, pointing out, for example, that many of the Liberal women who won in the 1996 election were in highly marginal seats and got in due to the size of the unexpected swing to the Liberals. However, the point is that it would be hard to depict Howard as being explicitly hostile to increasing the number of women in parliament, or in the workplace.

Nonetheless, like Keating, Howard does seem to see the optimum form of work for women as being part-time. He sees the government’s Workplace Relations Act as facilitating ‘permanent part time work with pro rata conditions’ as ‘an enormous step forward for Australian women. For the first time work and family can be combined with security, certainty and full entitlements.’\(^9\) Howard has long claimed that workplace reforms would ensure more family friendly workplaces by, for example, ensuring more flexible working hours, or the ability to work from home.\(^10\) He also claims to support child-care arguing that ‘I am often irked by the criticism of our child care policy, when the reality is, we have increased expenditure on child care ... and over the next four years the Government will fund an additional 83,000 new child care places.’\(^11\) He also acknowledges that the government does have a special responsibility to ensure that the ‘second shift’ of family and domestic responsibilities ‘does not become a new shackle upon women denying them the opportunity to be fully able to both achieve their career goals and maintain a close and fulfilling family life.’\(^12\) Howard supports skills update training for women who want to return to the workforce after spending time out while looking after children.\(^13\)

For all these reasons, it is going too far to say that Howard explicitly advocates putting women back in the kitchen. However, there are changes in the discourse around gender compared with the previous Labor governments and, indeed, with some previous Liberal leaders. One consequence of constructing gender
issues so completely in terms of individual (or rather ‘family’ and ‘parental’ choice) is that Howard does not make statements equivalent to Hawke’s or Keating’s regarding the need for women to be in the economy or workforce. There is not the same positive emphasis on the contributions which women can make to Australia’s competitive advantage if it uses the skills of both women and men. Feminism is seen as potentially threatening to the economy. So, the government’s response to the review of Affirmative Action legislation emphasised the need to make the Act more ‘business friendly’.

Howard’s assertions of the positive effects of many of his policies for women and families are also highly dubious. For example, an Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training’s (ACIRRT) study of enterprise agreements showed that only 10% of the operating enterprise agreements contained at least one family-friendly measure. Howard asserts that his government encourages ‘freedom of choice’ for parents. However, studies by Gillian Beer and Deborah Brennan argue that the government has introduced financial disincentives for many women in low income couple families with children to work, or work more, including increases in childcare costs.

Unlike his Labor or Liberal predecessors, Howard does not make strong statements against discrimination against women or acknowledging that women are disadvantaged in Australian society. Indeed, his lack of comments about existing disadvantage contrast with many statements acknowledging it made by Judi Moylan, his one-time Minister for the Status of Women. Moylan’s support for feminist perspectives was very different from Howard’s position and few feminists were surprised when she subsequently lost her position after the 1998 election. The Howard government’s policy decisions make it fairly clear that feminists are considered a special interest group. Howard’s former chief of staff, Nicole Feely, reportedly had to talk him out of totally abolishing the Office of the Status of Women and the Affirmative Action Agency. As it is, the Office of the Status of Women’s Budget was cut by 38 per cent and the staff reduced from 48 to 31. Marian Sawer has also listed a host of other cuts affecting women’s organisations made in the government’s first term in office. Government grants to women’s NGO’s and women’s advocacy groups were cut by half, after being cut completely initially. The Australian Bureau of Statistics, Women’s Statistics Unit, has been abolished. The Women’s Bureau in the Department of Employment, Education and Training has been effectively abolished. There has been a forty per cent cut to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, involving a loss of sixty staff, and which has particularly affected the Sex Discrimination Policy Unit. The position of Sex Discrimination Commissioner was under threat, along with other specialist human rights commissioner positions, and was only saved after a campaign by women within the Liberal government and Liberal Party as well as by a number of non-government women’s groups. The cuts continued into the government’s second
term in office, with well established feminist groups such as the Women’s Electoral Lobby losing most of their funding while the National Council of Women, a more conservative group, received $275,000 over three years. The Association for Non-English-Speaking Background Women of Australia had already been defunded in 1996. The government was also accused of stacking the 1999 Women’s Round Table advisory meeting with like-thinking women while excluding some feminist organisations. Aboriginal, Muslim and Jewish women’s groups were not invited — a point which indicates the multiple disadvantages faced by women who also suffer from the government’s general policies in regard to race and ethnicity.

Many of these measures can be seen to reflect not only the construction of feminists as a ‘special interest’ group but also the assumption that women should not be specifically targetted as a disadvantaged group. Nor should differences in patterns of disadvantage between women be recognised. Both the Women’s Statistics Unit and Women’s Bureau collected very detailed facts and figures on the position of women in Australian society. Government documents such as Budget papers make few explicit references to ‘women’ now compared with the Labor years. The Women’s Budget Statement, a statement that was often several hundred pages long, has been replaced by brief ministerial statements of some fourteen to forty pages long. There is no recognition that general government economic policies can impact differently upon women and men because of their different positioning in both the workplace, home and social security systems. So, for example, Howard asserts that ‘the way in which the economy operates, the way in which policies impact upon the community generally are of the same concern and of the same relevance to women as they are to men’. Treasurer Peter Costello stopped Judi Moylan from attempting to give a gender analysis of the government’s tax package to the Press, reportedly saying ‘I don’t think they’re interested’. A government which privileges individuals, over any understanding of social groups, would not see providing information on women as a major priority. As in traditional Liberal discourse, individuals are often being treated as though they are de-gendered when nothing could be further from the case.

Admittedly, given his emphasis on personal choice, Howard has mentioned the possibility of men staying home to look after the children, although he says this is ‘normally but not always’ the role of the mother. He is therefore prepared to contemplate the possibility of some changes to conventional constructions of masculinity, although he is hardly a positive advocate for them. Howard does support changing socially deviant forms of masculinity that involve violence against women but reinforces traditional forms of ‘real’ manhood in the process. He is proud of the government’s message that ‘real men don’t hit women’. He argues that his government’s prohibition on semi-automatic weapons has provided the women of Australia with ‘a greater sense of physical
The government also put more than four million dollars aside to help men encountering difficulties in their relationships, in an attempt to forestall family breakdown or domestic violence. Howard seems to be acknowledging a partial crisis of masculinity:

the Australian tradition of 'she'll be right, mate' has been very much the product of our strong self-belief that if you worked hard and looked after your family, this country would be able to provide the necessary opportunities to assure your further security. Today, there is mounting evidence that the Australian sense of self-confidence is being eroded like never before.

Such paragraphs give a strong hint that Howard is appealing to a masculinity that he thinks has been damaged by rapid social change and job insecurity. It is significant that, at the same time as defunding some major feminist groups, the Howard government gave $50,000 for two years to the Lone Fathers Association — a group which feminists have criticised for being extremely conservative and the source of One Nation's family policy. Howard has also criticised previous government legislation designed to 'punish rather than prevent injustice' — laws which, he claims, were 'inevitably against business and against men'.

It is not clear which laws he is singling out here since he claims to support 'effective anti-discrimination laws', while opposing measures such as quotas. Wherever Hewson was appealing for the resurrection of a masculinity that had been emasculated by the nanny state (to use an English expression), Howard is appealing to a masculinity that has been battered by changing times and 'political correctness'. By contrast with Hewson, Howard is reinforcing a conception of men as head of household and primary breadwinner. Consequently, one does not find Howard arguing, as did his foreign minister Downer, that the overseas stereotype that 'Australians are a sort of macho people' needs to change. Indeed, during his period as Liberal Leader, the party hierarchy cross-examined Downer over claims that he was gay.

Howard's own attitudes to issues of 'mainstream' sexuality, discussed in chapter three, throw considerable light on his support for particularly narrow, and heteronormative, constructions of masculinity and femininity. Howard has continued to block moves to remove tax and superannuation measures which discriminate against same-sex couples. His view that homosexual relations should stay a private matter and that gay and lesbian relationships should not receive the same legal status as heterosexual marriage, draws attention to a point which Pateman did not adequately address in her work on the marriage contract. The marriage contract was not just about patriarchy but also about constituting the citizen as someone with an, at least predominantly, heterosexual identity. Howard does not consider heterosexuality to be a private matter — indeed, he repeatedly publicly endorses it and develops financial packages which reward it. Howard is constructing a public/private divide in which the homosexual
and lesbian citizen disappear from public view just as surely as heterosexual women once did. The 1998 Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Guide contained a brief but eloquent comment on Howard’s persistent refusal to endorse the festival, pointing out that Howard had been elected on Mardi Gras parade night in 1996 on a platform that promised to rule ‘for all of us’. As in the case of John Hewson’s masculine ‘we’, one can only wonder whom ‘us’ included (and excluded).

**Conclusion**

The period of the Hawke/Keating and Howard governments therefore reveals some particularly interesting gender contestations in Australian political discourse. Traditional liberalism’s apparently abstract but actually gendered subject has been under challenge. Citizens are certainly no longer unproblematically seen as male heads of household. Perhaps it was not surprising that the construction of the traditional liberal citizen-subject was challenged most directly in Labor discourse. Labor’s welfare liberal tradition of recognising social groups rather than abstract individuals contributed to an explicit discourse about both women’s disadvantaged position in Australian society and the positive contributions which government should be facilitating women making. In this way, Labor went somewhat beyond Anne Phillip’s formulation that ‘Liberal democracy wants to ignore ... all more local identities and differences’, although, as pointed out in chapter two, they did see the economic as ultimately constructing common interests that reconciled difference. At the same time, women were still seen to have special family and child care responsibilities in a way that men did not. In addition, women were being added on to a Labor economic agenda for restructuring Australia, without addressing the likely impact of that agenda on women.

Hewson reveals yet another strategy for dealing with contestations over the construction of the Liberal subject. Repudiating any conception that people belonged to social groups and eulogising the autonomous individual, Hewson asserted that women could be self-reliant individuals too. Rather than providing positive measures to improve women’s position in society, women should be treated just like men. Hewson’s citizen is a more progressive version of Brown’s ‘fantastic’ abstract individual but one that nonetheless denies the realities of most women’s present lives and the supports, emotional and otherwise, that are necessary for the ‘self-reliant’ individual to operate. As Barbara Sullivan has pointed out, ‘degendering proposals tend to impose a norm of male life experiences on female subjects’.

Howard’s position is also very complex, far more complex than many of his Labor critics allow for. However, if there is one certainty, it is that Howard, unlike Hewson, does not see women as being like men. His privileging of the family involves particular implications for women. Despite occasional references
to the possibility that men could stay home to look after children, it is clear that he sees women as having particular responsibilities in the domestic sphere. Unlike Keating and Hewson, he does not emphasise the importance of encouraging women to enter the public sphere of the economy. His liberal citizen-subject is far less reconstructed, and far more traditional. Indeed, his construction of the issue as one of freedom of choice virtually implies an admission that the subject is not gender-neutral. His position is perhaps closer to that of a Millian liberal in which women have certain choices to make. However, often, in Howard’s rhetoric, it becomes as an issue of choice for the family, in which it is not at all clear what the respective decision-making powers of men and women will be. At such times, women are being discursively dissolved back into the family. Moller Okin has already drawn attention to the argument that in traditional liberal discourse ‘the interests of the members of the family of each patriarch are perceived as entirely convergent with his own, and consequently women disappear from the subject of politics.’ Howard is obviously not going as far as that but, given the history of women’s disappearance into the family, the emphasis on ‘family choice’ is one that would concern many feminists. It is also a conception which constructs the family in heterosexual terms, denying recognition to alternative relationship and family structures. The ‘family’ also acts as a code for traditional gender relations designed to make those challenged by social change feel relaxed and comfortable. The complexities of Howard’s position should not surprise us given Brown’s point that liberalism simultaneously produces gendered subjects, whose differences are seen as natural and abstract individuals who appear to be genderless. Howard’s political discourse simultaneously denies the relevance of gender categories (individual choice versus special interests) while confirming them (the family and the importance of traditional motherhood).

The gendered construction of the liberal citizen subject is therefore still very much a contested issue in which liberal ideology, in its various forms, can accommodate a wide variety of positions which incorporate women, as well as different constructions of femininity, masculinity and sexuality. Indeed, the degree of flexibility is an issue which feminist and queer theorists could usefully address in more depth. Nonetheless, issues of gender and sexuality are still playing very important roles in the constitution of Australian political discourse.

Endnotes

5 Brown, States of Injury, pp 142, 152-161.
10 Marian Sawer and Marian Simms, A Woman’s Place: Women and Politics in Australia, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, pp 1-16.
17 Investing in the Nation, p 13.
34 *Fightback! It’s Your Australia*, p 18.
38 Hewson, Fifth National Women’s Conference, typescript, pp 5-6, 9.
52 Transcript, 7.30 Report, ABC, Monday 16 September 1996.


57 Howard, ‘Fair Australia’, p 12.

58 Howard, Interview with Alan Jones, radio 2UE, 16 March 1998.

59 ‘The role of government’, p 18.

60 John Howard, Address to the Inaugural Corporate Business Women’s Luncheon, Grand Hyatt Hotel, Melbourne, 27 March 1998.


63 Howard, Re-launch of ‘Among the Carrion Crows’, p 3. He doesn’t mention that the Fraser government never ratified the convention following campaigns by conservative women’s groups.

64 Prime Minister, Press release, 27 March 1998.

65 Howard, Opening Address to the Liberal Women’s Conference, Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, 13 March 1998, typescript, p 1.

66 Howard, Transcript of radio interview with Mike Carlton, ABC Radio 2BL, 15 October 1997.


68 Howard, ‘Fair Australia’, p 12.

69 Howard, Re-launch of ‘Among the Carrion Crows’, p 4.

70 Howard, Address to The Inaugural Corporate Business Women’s Luncheon.


73 Australian Centre for Industrial Research and Training, University of Sydney, ADAM (Agreements Database and Monitor), Report 16, March 1998, Part Two.


75 Keynote address by the Hon Judi Moylan MP, Minister for the Status of Women, Australian Businesswomen’s Network, Celebrating Women Lunch, 6 March 1998.

76 Sydney Morning Herald, Good Weekend, 15 June 1996.


78 Sydney Morning Herald, 16 September 1997.


80 Sydney Morning Herald, 22 October 1999.

82 John Howard, Transcript of Launch of Women’s Policy, Stamford Hotel, Adelaide, 15 September 1998.
83 Australian, 21 August 1998.
84 Howard, Interview with Alan Jones, radio 2UE, 16 March 1998; Opening Address to the Liberal Women’s Conference, Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, 13 March 1998, typescript, p 4; Interview with Alan Jones, radio 2UE, 26 July 1999.
85 Howard, Opening Address to the Liberal Women’s Conference, p 4.
86 Howard, Opening Address to the Liberal Women’s Conference, p 3.
89 Sarah Maddison, Australian, 6 October 1999.
91 Howard, Re-launch of ‘Among the Carrion Crows’, p 5.
95 Sydney Morning Herald, 10 December 1999.
98 Okin, Women in Political Thought, p 202.
Chapter Six

The Increasing Challenge to Grand Narratives: Economic Liberalism and the Postmodern Republic

The preceding chapters have made a strong case for arguing that traditional political discourse and traditional political ideologies such as liberalism have been under increasing challenge due to social and economic change. The various forms taken by the politics of identity have been just one indication of this challenge as the constitution of the traditional liberal citizen as white, male, heterosexual, property owner has been increasingly contested.

For postmodernists, such contestations would indicate the decline of universalising ideologies such as liberalism; ideologies which claimed to liberate everyone while in fact privileging a narrowly constituted political subject. However if, as argued in previous chapters, liberalism is alive and well in its various forms, and adapting to the challenges facing it at the turn of the century, what does this mean for postmodernist arguments that ‘meta’ or ‘grand’ narratives such as liberalism are in decline? Are grand narratives undermined by such factors as an increasing fragmentation of identity? Has the increasing internationalisation of the economy, and concern about winners and losers, undermined the liberal belief in economic progress? It will be argued in this chapter that postmodern theory is indeed useful for understanding some of the key challenges with which political discourse is engaging. However, postmodernist theory has been less effective at anticipating government responses to these challenges — challenges which have shored up ideologies such as economic liberalism.

Australia is a particularly interesting location from which to engage with postmodernism. Andrew Milner, a critic of many postmodernist theorists, has hypothesised ‘that Australian postmodernity has been the specific outcome of a history in which neither cultural nor social modernity were ever anything more than approximately realised’ due to Australia’s failure to fully industrialise, its high levels of consumption, its aesthetic populism and its postcolonial status.1 Similarly, Peter Beilharz has written that Australia ‘is peculiarly modern, premodern and postmodern all at the same time’.2 Don Watson, Keating’s major speech writer argued that, because of its emphasis on tolerance and difference, Australia ‘might be the first postmodern republic’.3 Writing during the period of Labor government, Paul Patton used Deleuzian and Derridean perspectives on
difference to analyse the Mabo decision arguing that ‘the Mabo judgement exemplifies a more positive recognition of difference ... between European and Aboriginal relations to the land’ in which colonial conceptions are no longer automatically privileged or recognition of difference seen as a threat to unity. He too suggested that Mabo indicated a move towards a postmodern republic (presumably subsequently reversed by Howard’s land rights legislation). Anna Yeatman was less sanguine, noting Labor’s attempts to deal with difference but also noting the increased impact of arguments based on private property rights and the continuing influence of western modernity. Meanwhile, attacks on postmodernism featured prominently in Australia’s ‘culture wars’, driven by postmodernism’s celebration of difference and its allegedly ‘relativist’ critique of traditional orthodoxies. What then is postmodernism and can it help us understand contemporary Australian political discourse and its attitudes towards managing change?

‘Postmodernism’

Postmodernism is one of the most contentious terms in the humanities and social sciences, not the least because it is used, in somewhat different senses, in disciplines ranging from art and architecture to literary studies, politics, sociology and philosophy. The term is also associated with a diverse range of thinkers, many of whom are reluctant to impose a fixed definition on the term and some of whom, such as Baudrillard or Guattari, sometimes deny being postmodernists. However, a good place to start with is the discussion of the critique which postmodernism makes of the modernist tradition.

One may well wish to argue that many postmodernist conceptions of modernism simplify, or even distort, what is a very complex, and often contradictory, body of thought. Nonetheless, for postmodernists, modernism is ‘generally perceived as positivistic, technocentric, and rationalistic. Universal modernism has been identified with the belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders and the standardisation of knowledge and production’. In short, modernism involves beliefs about change and progress. In this understanding of modernism, modernism is associated with a belief in hard ‘scientific’ facts that can be easily established as ‘truths’ beyond contention and debate. There is a belief that the application of reason in planning society, especially the application of technological and technocratic solutions to social, political and economic problems will result in ‘progress’. There is a suggestion that progress depends upon the application of a central set of beliefs about how society, political life and the economy should be organised. There is the implication that human society is inevitably ‘progressing’ towards a better form of society in which each successive form of society is an improvement on the last. There is a suggestion that past
forms of knowledge become outdated as humanity increasingly progresses towards truth and the light.

All these beliefs would be disputed by postmodernists. Postmodernists would question whether there are absolute, indisputable political, social or economic truths, never mind that society is progressing towards them. What most postmodernists are talking about here is not necessarily a critique of all ‘truth’, as suggested by some Australian critics such as Keith Windschuttle and further promulgated by the media during the ‘culture wars’ attacks on so-called cultural ‘relativism’.9 Rather, the ‘truths’ most commonly in postmodernists’ sights are ‘universalising’ truths about society and the human condition. In order to understand this point in more depth, we need to proceed to an understanding of the postmodernist critique of metanarratives.

Lyotard has gone so far as to define postmodernism as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’.10 By ‘meta’ or ‘grand’ narratives, he is referring to emancipatory ‘narrations with a legitimating function’.11 The political metanarratives particularly in postmodernist’s sights are Enlightenment bodies of thought such as political liberalism, economic liberalism, marxism and anarchism which argued that human societies were moving towards a realm of freedom in which an enlightened citizenry would have control over their own destinies.12 For Lyotard, the time of emancipatory metanarratives is past. The grand narratives of liberalism and marxism alike have been ‘refuted’ by events, they have become ‘scarcely credible’:

All that is proletarian is communist, all that is communist is proletarian: ‘Berlin 1953’, ‘Budapest 1956’, ‘Czechoslovakia 1968’, ‘Poland 1980’ (to name but a few) refute the doctrine of historical materialism: the workers rise up against the Party. All that is democratic is by the people and for the people, and vice versa: ‘May 1968’ refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism. Everyday society brings the representative institution to a halt. Everything that promotes the free flow of supply and demand is good for general prosperity and vice versa: the ‘crises of 1911 and 1929’ refute the doctrine of economic liberalism, and the ‘crisis of 1974-1979’ refutes the post-Keynesian modification of that doctrine.13

In short, Lyotard is suggesting that the major legitimating political grand narratives have met their nemesis, including liberalism, since capitalism ‘is hardly bothered by the decline of the grand narratives of universality (including the liberal narrative of humanity’s increasing prosperity)’14 Lyotard acknowledges that capitalism ‘calls for the complete hegemony of the economic genre of discourse’. Nonetheless, he suggests that capitalism does not need legitimation because it prescribes nothing in the normative sense, while being present everywhere as ‘necessity’.15 The narrative of humanity’s increasing prosperity no longer holds because ‘it is now impossible to legitimate development by promising emancipation for humanity as a whole’. Development has been
responsible for impoverishment in the South and the third world. Despite the efforts of ‘the political class’, emancipatory ideals of liberalism ‘are on the wane in general attitudes in what we call developed nations’. The uncritical belief in progress and positive change has been undermined.

In more recent works, Lyotard argues that liberal and pro-capitalist discourses have defeated socialist and marxist ones. Such an insight might lead him to question whether liberal economic and political metanarratives are really in decline. However, Lyotard merely argues that the success of liberal democratic societies is due to them being more open and pluralistic rather than being due to the continuing influence of particular metanarratives or forms of legitimation. In other words, more ‘open’ societies are better able to deal with the fragmented plurality of emancipatory demands that arise in a world in which grand narratives are in decline. Such an argument is consistent with Lyotard’s own support for a greater pluralisation and fragmentation of knowledge: seeing such fragmentation as inherently subversive since it undermines metanarratives.

The postmodernist critique of metanarratives has been criticised on a number of grounds, not the least that, far from being inherently subversive, it rules out alternative narratives critiquing generalised forms of oppression, for example, feminist grand narratives critiquing women’s oppression and striving for women’s emancipation and liberation. Postmodernism has also been criticised for being a particularly Eurocentric body of thought, obsessed with the declining influence of European intellectual traditions and the challenges which difference has posed to the unitary white, male, European subject. In short, it is argued that postmodernism universalises the crisis of the western subject. Admittedly, this is an interpretation that would be disputed by many postmodernists. Nonetheless, critics such as Cornel West see postmodernism as neglecting both third world and black U.S. developments. West argues that postmodernism not only fails to analyse the political and cultural specificity of the ‘other’ in any detail but that it in fact helps to reproduce the ‘other’. Australian writers such as Anna Yeatman have also argued that postmodernism ‘represents a crisis of authority for the western knowing subject, posed by the refusal to stay silenced on the part of those whom this subject had cast as Other: natives, colonials, women and all who are placed in a client relationship to expert, professional authority’. Yeatman acknowledges that forms of postmodernism can be quite different depending upon whether they are developed from the standpoint of the ‘master subject’ or the ‘Other’. She cites Saïd and West to admit that ‘from the standpoint of those who are contesting their status as Other, postmodernism appears as the efforts of the modern imperial, patriarchal master subject to manage the extent and direction of the crisis for his authority’.

As well, postmodernists such as Lyotard have not analysed the varied responses of advocates of grand narratives to problems of difference. Lyotard’s strength lies in drawing attention to the fact that grand narratives are being
contested in contemporary society, indeed one may wish to argue that they have always been contested on grounds such as lack of inclusiveness of gender or race, or class. This contestation has undoubtedly contributed to the feelings of uncertainty noted in earlier chapters. Arguments about ‘necessity’ do also feature prominently in much current political and economic discourse. However, Lyotard’s position doesn’t allow sufficiently for the complexities and varieties of liberal grand narratives. Despite their limitations, many liberal democratic political rights and freedoms are highly laudable, indeed absolutely essential. Liberal ideology has been utilised by many marginalised groups to struggle for their rights. Nonetheless, as pointed out in previous chapters, there can also be variants of liberal ideology that rely on incorporating, assimilating or denying difference. Difference does not need to contribute to the dissolution of grand narratives. Rather, difference can be incorporated into grand narratives as in the case of the Keating government or the legitimacy of difference can be denied and the traditional, unreconstructed grand narrative reaffirmed as in the case of the Howard government. Indeed, the argument in chapter two could be recast as an attempt to face the challenges of postmodernism by either incorporating them or dissolving them into modernist perspectives.

Furthermore, as John R Gibbons has noted, conservative and traditionalist politicians have a number of responses to a postmodernist political landscape of ‘difference, dealignment and realignment, unpredictability, freedom, delegitimization and distrust, power and spontaneity’.

In order to deal with fragmented, often hedonistic, individuals and establish threatened forms of political legitimation, such politicians often use populist strategies that appeal to individualist distrust of intrusive big government. Similarly, they can attempt to establish forms of consensus by appeals to political nostalgia, including mobilising popular sentiment around issues such as nationalism, reconstructing tradition and so on.

In doing so, politicians draw on long histories of attempting to develop consensus politics that unite ‘the nation’ behind them. It is therefore debatable how much these are in fact strategies that are responses to postmodernity per se or an adaptation of previous strategies. Nonetheless, it would be hard not to notice the relevance of Gibbon’s comments for the analysis given in previous chapters. The Howard government has been attempting to reconstruct traditional certainties and identities in the face of threatening social and economic change. Its critique of Labor policy certainly drew on fears of intrusive government.

Another problem with Lyotard’s arguments is that they don’t adequately allow for the fact that the question of whether ‘grand narratives’ are in decline or not, largely depends on the position from which one is approaching the question. For Lyotard, as we have seen, the essence of liberal economic views lies in the argument that capitalist economic growth will generate greater prosperity for all. For the moment, we will accept this characterisation of liberal economic
views. Lyotard argues that the belief in capitalist prosperity has been ‘refuted’ by successive recessions and depressions. Now, to begin with, one could argue that there are numerous interpretations of capitalism and liberalism that would not accept this ‘refutation’ at all. Not only does it seem strange that so many former ‘Eastern bloc’ countries have rushed to embrace elements of market liberalism if this were the case, but there are numerous political figures and theorists who continue to argue that, despite their faults, capitalist markets still offer the best chance of prosperity for all. Australian versions of such views have been discussed at depth in earlier chapters of this book. The resurgence of a belief in predominantly market-driven prosperity has been in no small part due to the influence of New Right theorists drawing on liberal economic arguments that go back to Adam Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ — fortuitous digits that would ensure that the pursuit of individual self interest was in the *common good*. In this latter respect, such arguments constitute a universalising grand narrative of human emancipation. Furthermore, these arguments have not been confined to the traditional right-wing parties. They have been so pervasive that, as pointed out in previous chapters, watered-down versions of New Right policies have been introduced by parties traditionally associated with the left of the political spectrum, for example by Australian Labor governments.

As a postmodernist, Lyotard should know only too well that there is a plurality of meanings and interpretations available. Far from being uncontested ‘refutations’, capitalist economic downturns can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Western governments of various political perspectives in the post-war period could interpret them as merely signalling the need for government economic management to ‘smooth out’ economic cycles of boom and depression, with their associated unemployment, so that predominantly capitalist economies could continue to produce prosperity. This was certainly the response of the Curtin and Chifley Labor governments in Australia. On the other hand, monetarists such as Milton Friedman believed the thirties’ depression had been caused by inappropriate government interventions in the market. Similarly, current economic problems are generating various responses, from arguments in favour of increased government intervention to arguments that untrammelled market forces should be allowed to remove the inefficient and uncompetitive, so that the private sector can get back on its feet again. Most of these arguments assume that, far from future economic prosperity being undermined, they have the key to achieving it. These arguments take place largely within a broad liberal continuum, which stretches from *laissez-faire* liberalism on the one hand to welfare liberalism on the other; in other words, from the New Right to versions of Keynesian social democracy. There has always been debate within the liberal tradition over issues such as how limited the role of the state should be, over the degree of government regulation of capitalism that is permissible and over how much one should privilege the rights of individual entrepreneurs.
However, despite his arguments regarding terroristic silencing or marginalisation of alternative views, Lyotard misses the significance of the decline of alternative views to market liberalism and market liberalism’s positioning as the victorious metanarrative.

The historical victory of free market liberalism was proclaimed by many after the fall of communism, ranging from Francis Fukuyama and George Bush to Margaret Thatcher. Paul Keating also claimed that Australia’s energy ‘flows from the genius and ambition of our people which the combination of liberal democracy and free markets alone can deliver’. The Liberal Party has made even stronger statements:

Governments can never substitute for individual achievements. The Coalition’s commitment to individual choice, private enterprise and economic growth is one that derives not from ideology but from practical results. Our own history testifies, and the collapse of socialism everywhere confirms, that economic growth based on individual private enterprise is the best way to generate a dynamic economy, to maximise freedom and to enable society to care properly for those in real need.

John Howard has made numerous speeches in which he has championed market driven policies arguing that they will lead to greater prosperity (and share ownership) for all Australians. It is a very modernist tale of progress in which a reforming government tackles budget debt, privatisation, labour market deregulation, industrial relations reform on the wharves, telecommunications reform and taxation reform. Howard’s story is one of ‘defining change’ and seizing the agenda in order to ensure that Australia becomes one of the world’s most productive and economically competitive nations. It is a story of positioning Australia to be a global winner in terms of economic growth and prosperity. They are speeches which look, even on Lyotard’s own terms, very much like a re-statement of classic liberal economic grand narratives, including a re-confirmed belief in economic progress and prosperity.

The argument that metanarratives such as economic liberalism are alive and well also questions the arguments of Baudrillard and others that we have now moved into an economy of signs in which consumer goods operate as ‘signs’ rather than just objects of utility. Goods are purchased for their desired meanings — signs that indicate one’s position in a social hierarchy or sub-culture, signs of prestige, of status and of style. Consequently, grand narratives and economic legitimations are no longer needed as desire and seduction replace older forms of capitalist legitimation. For Baudrillard, signs and meanings have become increasingly separated from social ‘reality’. They have become increasingly self-referential, leading an independent existence, and can create a ‘reality’ or, in Baudrillardian terms, a hyper-reality. The development of mass media and new information technologies increases these tendencies. The
populace is constantly bombarded by media and advertising images while even economic transactions become simulated ones using information technologies that link international markets. Images become a simulacrum, in other words, they are totally separated from any underlying reality and lead a life of their own. In this society, the credibility of governments is marketed like any other consumer good sold through advertising. The economy also is a simulacrum. For example, global debt exists as a spectacle, as a parallel universe, as an amount that never can or will be paid.

Baudrillard’s extravagances of expression and sombre playfulness make it relatively easy to distort and caricature his arguments. Nonetheless, his analysis does have significant problems. John Clarke argues that Baudrillard’s analysis of simulation and commodities as signs goes so far that it begins to totally ignore the conditions of their production and consumption or the fact that they are also frequently obvious objects of utility: ‘If we take the most vulgar case, I am uncertain how Baudrillard subsists if he is unable to distinguish food objects (which may also signify) from signs (which may represent food objects)... I want to insist that there is a material difference between the menu and the objects which it represents.’

All the same, Baudrillard’s insight that consumer goods often operate as signs is an important one that many economic analyses neglect. He does draw our attention to the economy as culture, and often popular culture, in a way that few other theorists do. His arguments also draw attention to how governments sell ‘signs’ in economic discourse, for example, of Australia at the cutting edge of the new information economy or of Australian exports competing successfully overseas. Meaghan Morris has used some Baudrillardian insights when analysing the ecstatic ways in which some (seduced and ravished) media commentators lauded Keating’s performance as Treasurer. Similarly, during the eighties, the Australian news media idolised speculative entrepreneurs who were, we now know, teetering on the brink of financial disaster, constructing them as icons of Australian nationalism. However, acknowledging the political impact and importance of signs and meanings is far from saying that we now live in a period of hyper-reality. Indeed, Australia’s best postmodern-influenced cultural commentators such as Meaghan Morris or McKenzie Wark combine forms of media analysis with social and political analysis in ways that would be quite alien to Baudrillard at his most hyper-real. Morris’s analyses of Keating’s selling of economics have already been mentioned. McKenzie Wark has mounted an impassioned argument for a reformed social democracy that addresses issues such as inequality while engaging with media influence, celebrity, popular desire and the politics of culture. Wark reminds those who are hesitant to see the political relevance of popular culture and celebrity that ‘the rise of Pauline Hanson showed how political operators could mobilise a populist movement
with the help of a leader with an instinctive grasp of celebrity power and a
distinctive articulation of a view of the fair go'.

In short, Baudrillard’s insights regarding the influence of signs, meanings
and the media can be valuable but are taken too far. Furthermore, consumerism
has been used to reinforce rather than undermine liberal grand narratives: to
encourage a conception of citizen as consumer of both private sector and
government services and to reinforce the imperative of economic growth for
individual self-realisation. Nor does economic discourse really reflect a historical
change, a move from a period of industrial production to a period of simulation.
Current liberal economic discourse still retains many of the principles of traditional
liberal discourse, for example, Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ is no more or less of a
simulation than it ever was. Australia, like many other countries, has been
going through a period of restructuring the economy in a much more prosaic
sense. Labour market deregulation and the transfer of public sector assets to
the private sector are not merely about issues of style and consumption, they
are about issues such as changing forms of production and the need to ensure
profitability by transferring public sector infrastructure to the private sector or
by deregulating the labour market to weaken unions and increase the degree of
permissible exploitation.

This is not to deny that political discourse often seeks to establish particular
conceptions of what is ‘real’, for example, economic rationalism constructs a
reality that depicts deregulation as inevitable. Similarly, the analysis in this book
has emphasised the powerful effects of political discourse and the importance
of interpretation in influencing action. However, that is different from believing
that political power is now just a simulation. Economic activity and government
policy impact upon peoples’ everyday lives in ways that, however contested
interpretations of ‘reality’ may be, cannot be relegated to the level of simulations.
Nor are the power relations that people encounter just to be found at the level
of the media and codes, although they certainly present at those sites amongst
others. They are also to be found in such sites as the workplace, the home, the
street, the sites of purchasing goods and services and a myriad of other locations.
Baudrillard neglects some of the more mundane forms of economic power
which people encounter in their everyday lives, for example, when negotiating
with the boss in an enterprise bargaining situation or when employees are sacked
and communities suffer because an employer is moving production off-shore.
Such events can hardly be described as simulations. Above all, it is noticeable
that Baudrillard’s writing neglects the key role which economic discourse still
plays in political life. Key elements of Australian government discourse still
focus on production, on jobs and forms of economic identity that go far beyond
consumer ‘signs’.
Conclusion

Scott Lash began his 1990 book on the *Sociology of Postmodernism* with the words: ‘Postmodernism is, patently, no longer trendy’.

Trendy it may not be, however, it has been argued here that postmodernism does still have some insights to offer, despite its problems. Theories of postmodern fragmentation and consumer identity are pertinent, it is just that Australian political discourse, like political discourse elsewhere has often moved to incorporate them into more traditional, indeed more modernist, discourses. The commentators cited at the beginning of this chapter were therefore right to note both modernist and postmodernist elements in Australian discourse, even if their explanations may have sometimes differed from those given here. The next three chapters will analyse the ways in which those discourses have adapted to governing change in more depth.

Endnotes

Governing Change

19 Lyotard, ‘The wall, the gulf, and the sun’, pp 116-123.
31 Green, *The New Right*, p 64.
33 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p 82.
37 See eg. John Howard, transcript of Address at the Leaders’ Breakfast, the Liberal Party National Convention, Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, 14 March 1998.
48 Wark, *Celebrities, Culture and Cyberspace*, p 21
Chapter Seven

Neo-Liberalism: New Ways of Governing Economic Life

While liberal ideology and grand narratives continue to be influential in Australian political discourse, they are being adapted to changing circumstances. This chapter analyses the implications of changing attitudes to the state that are present in contemporary neo-liberalism. Given that neo-liberalism argues for privatisation, deregulation, free markets and increasing the role of the private sector, the state begins to play somewhat different roles in shaping and influencing the behaviour of its citizens, encouraging both new forms of self-managing and self-regulating behaviour by individuals and relying on the disciplinary power of the market to influence citizen behaviour. The analysis in this chapter will draw on some Foucauldian insights regarding forms of neo-liberal governmentality but will also emphasise other factors, particularly the increasing use of market power. A central argument will be that while the discourses of neo-liberalism may argue against old forms of state interventionism associated with Keynesian economics and the welfare state, they advocate other forms of state activity. To draw again on a quotation from Janine Brodie: ‘it is important to stress that the ascendancy of the market over politics does not mean that the state is disappearing. Rather, state power has been redeployed from social welfare concerns and economic management to the enforcement of the market model in virtually all aspects of everyday life.’

In order to explore these insights in more depth, it is necessary to give a brief account of Foucault’s conception of governmentality. John S Ransom has pointed out that traditional liberal political theory tended to concern itself with issues such as the rights and duties of citizens and which forms and functions of state power were considered legitimate. However, Foucault is returning to an older, sixteenth century meaning of government which ‘did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed.’ Consequently, as Nikolas Rose points out, Foucault’s conception of government ‘draws our attention to the variety of ways of reflecting and acting which aimed to shape, guide, manage or regulate the conduct of persons — not only other persons but also oneself — in the light of certain principles or goals’. Foucault is therefore useful for analysing less obvious and often less formalised relations of power, particularly ones that involve forms of self management and self-regulation.
As Hindess and Dean note, Foucault is mounting an implicit critique of liberal conceptions that government should be conceived of in terms of focusing on the state and state laws and regulation, rather than on a multiplicity of agencies in the social body. Analyses of governmentality also conceive of state based discourse in the broadest possible sense. Political thought is understood not just in terms of the principles of economic theory or political philosophy but also in terms of ‘the multifarious, practical, and pragmatic forms of programmatic thought and know-how produced by professionals, experts and specialists’. Consequently, Foucauldian studies have concentrated on issues as diverse as the role of accounting and auditing techniques and psychiatric expertise. In short, advanced liberal democratic societies are not only governed through direct state mechanisms but also via ‘indirect’ mechanisms through which ‘economic, social and personal conduct’ are aligned with social and political objectives. Foucauldians are particularly interested in examining the forms of power that involve, to use Bruno Latour’s phrase, governing ‘at a distance’. Given the focus of this book, the discussion in this chapter will still concentrate on government discourse in the narrow, state-linked sense, and on the discourse of politicians in particular. However, it will be argued that even the adequate analysis of government discourse requires an understanding of other sites and techniques of governmentality. Australian governments’ attempts to shape citizen behaviour are often closely related to the existence of extra-state forms of governmentality, particularly, in the current climate, market-related governance.

One can already see why Foucauldian thought places less emphasis on the role of political ideology than many other bodies of thought. The move away from issues of legitimation to studying issues of technique is one factor. Exponents of governmentality tend to define technique in terms of a technology of knowledge involving ‘technical devices of writing, listing, numbering and computing that render a realm into discourse as a knowable, calculable and administrable object.’ In the process, ‘problems’ are identified, theories ‘constitute new sectors of reality and make new fields of existence practicable’ and domains such as ‘the economy’ are conceptualised and constituted.

However, as well as placing his emphasis on discourse and technologies of knowledge, Foucault objected to the very notion of ideology. He argued that the concept of ‘ideology’ both assumed a notion of truth and necessarily functioned in a subordinate relationship to something else, an ‘infrastructure’ such as material and/or economic determinants. He claimed that the idea of ideology critique was based on emancipating truth from the mystification of ideology and illusion. By contrast, Foucault’s political project was to detach ‘the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.’ Foucault was not necessarily denying that things can be ‘true’ as Australian critics of his ‘relativism’, such as Keith Windschuttle, have suggested. Rather, Foucault was interested in...
analysing the political regimes of truth that are established for determining what is ‘true’, or ‘false’. For example, he argues that it is still worth examining the regimes of truth in a discipline such as mathematics, even if the theories being studied are quite valid.\textsuperscript{15}

However, as earlier chapters of this book make clear, it is quite possible to use the concept of ideology in ways that do not presuppose issues of false consciousness, ‘truth’ or an economic reductionism. Indeed, it has been argued here that government discourse has itself played an important role in constructing particular forms of the economic, rather than being reducible to it. Nonetheless, for most Foucauldians, liberalism is not seen as an ideology — it ‘is not a theory, an ideology, a juridical philosophy of individual freedom, or any particular set of policies adopted by a government’. Rather, it is ‘a rationally reflected way of doing things which functions as the principle and method for the rationalisation of government practices’.\textsuperscript{16} Traditional liberalism limited state intervention arguing that market actors made better economic decisions regarding their own business concerns than the state and that the state would benefit from greater wealth if it governed less. In this view, contemporary forms of liberalism differ from earlier forms in that they do not see the market as already existing in some natural form but as something that government needs to actively construct through establishing particular political, legal and institutional conditions. The state is then faced with the additional dilemma of needing to encourage the development of the particular forms of ‘autonomous’ and ‘free’ individuals that neo-liberal styles of government depend upon, given that liberal sovereignty in general takes a less directly coercive form than more authoritarian forms of rule.\textsuperscript{17}

Such arguments both provide important insights and have a number of problems. Certainly, the insight that, precisely because of governing at a distance, liberal society requires the development of particular forms of self-regulating and self-managing individuals, is an important one that has relevance for Australian political discourse. However, a number of problems also arise. Firstly, why does liberalism have to be either a form of activity/technique of government or an ideology, set of principles, set of policies? Why can’t liberalism be all of these things? Surely, part of understanding why the Howard government favours the particular techniques of government that it does, involves understanding how the government interprets the political imperatives of the current period in Australia and the international economy? Ideology is still a useful concept for understanding government interpretations. Furthermore, issues of legitimation are still very important as the Howard government tries to sell its views and policies to the electorate. (Party electoral strategies tend to be neglected by governmentality approaches).

The state is also constrained by the power of the private sector in the techniques of government it can introduce. For example, if the state antagonises private business, not only can the resources of the private sector be mobilised
against the government of the day – as in the case of the defeat of the Chifley
and Whitlam Labor governments – but the private sector can also substantially
cut investment in the Australian economy with all that means for massive job
losses and resultant electoral instability. This raises an important issue, namely
the power of the private sector and whether power under liberal capitalism
isn't better understood as involving a very complex, and sometimes contradictory,
combination of self regulating and coercive disciplinary powers, rather than as
a move away from coercion to self-regulation. The power of the private sector
is neglected in much of the governmentality literature, which tends to leave out
consideration of the extent to which government policies are constrained and
influenced by both liberal ideology and by the practical exigencies of a capitalist
economy. After all, private sector profitability is a major concern for
governments, not least because private sector investment has such a crucial
impact upon jobs and electoral chances. Government strategies of privatisation
and corporatisation can also be extremely profitable for, and be encouraged by,
the private sector.

Furthermore, the differences between traditional and contemporary forms
of liberalism delineated earlier are perhaps not quite as substantial as it would
seem, despite the historical changes that have taken place. Firstly, as Graham
Burchell acknowledges, the state has always helped to legally constitute some
essential relationships of domination and subordination under capitalism, rather
than just relying on ‘natural’ market mechanisms. For example, as marxists
have long pointed out, private ownership of the means of production, such as
factories and other businesses, is enshrined in law. If striking workers were to
occupy them or attempt to seize control of them, they would be doing so illegally
and would be subject to the full weight of the law. Secondly, the state has partly
been more pro-active in recent times in propagating market relations, rather
than relying on a ‘natural’ market, because it has had to dismantle some of the
protections set up by the post-war welfare state. In other words, the re­
negotiation of the respective roles of state and market has involved the state
not merely in trying to construct forms of citizen identity and conduct appropriate
for the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but in reconstituting an
independent and entrepreneurial citizen identity that had been undermined by
the development of a more extensive public and welfare sector. In short, the
forms of independence and self-provision which a lack of the welfare state had
necessitated may well have seemed ‘natural’ in the nineteenth century in ways
which they did not in the late twentieth century. Barry Hindess acknowledges
both change and continuity when he writes that neo-liberalism ‘represents a
generalisation of Smith’s liberal attack on the effects of police interference in
economic activity, which is now brought to bear on areas of government
intervention which had hitherto been protected because they had been seen as
essentially non-economic in character.’ Or, to be even more precise, neo-
liberal attacks have been partly motivated by a rejection of previous Keynesian welfare liberal views that forms of government activity such as welfare provision benefit the private sector by keeping up consumption levels.  

Nikolas Rose has perhaps best summed up some of the implications for contemporary liberal rule when he writes that advanced liberal rule seeks to govern 'through the regulated choices of individual citizens. And it seeks to detach the substantive authority of expertise from the apparatuses of political rule, relocating experts within a market governed by the rationalities of competition, accountability and consumer demand'.  

Rose's comments are astute in many respects. Government emphasis on regulated choice is clear. For example, as pointed out in a previous chapter, government policy and discourse are helping to shape individual decisions by giving families tax and other incentives for women to stay in the home. Tax policy has become a classic mode of 'governing at a distance', in which particular individual choices and behaviours are encouraged. No one familiar with the rise of consultants, audits and the increasing influence of economists and accountants in modern forms of managerialism, could deny the importance of those forms of expertise. However, once again, those forms of expertise do not just rely on self-regulation but have often been harnessed to the causes of increasing profits and making labour subject to the crudest forms of coercive market control. Of course, these coercive external forms of discipline then give rise to forms of self-regulation as people jockey to get ahead or to keep their jobs — they operate partly as what Habermas, who will be discussed in the next chapter, would see as a system of rewards and sanctions. Whether it is an academic line-manager being expected to manage a totally inadequate budget or a worker terrified of redundancy, there are external coercive elements that are combined with forms of self-regulating and self-managing behaviour as people jump through requisite hoops.

Once again, this is not to deny that there have been changes to liberalism, for example, in earlier chapters, I discussed a form of neo-liberalism that involves the attempt to construct multiple forms of economic identity that go far beyond white, male, rational economic man. These methods are far more sophisticated and inclusive than earlier exclusionary liberal techniques. Regimes of race, ethnicity and gender intersect with forms of governmentality in numerous ways, as particular forms of citizen behaviour are encouraged. Gender and racial issues were often neglected by Foucault himself. However, some subsequent Foucauldian work has attempted to apply Foucauldian insights to race, gender and ethnicity. The Keating and Howard governments' projects are partly about two different forms of governmentality. Forms of identity are used to encourage forms of behaviour. In the Keating government's practice, governmentality takes the form of attempting to construct a range of identities in ways that are compatible with the Labor government's conceptions of reconstructing the Australian economy. So, as explained in chapter two, women are encouraged
to participate in the economy in order to contribute to our competitive advantage or Aboriginal culture is seen as a marketable commodity. Howard could be seen as rebelling against Keating’s conception of governmentality, by reasserting more traditional gender, race and class categories, constructed around an apparently abstract individual (who is really rational economic man). Note that Keating and Howard are promoting different forms of market identity. Market identity has taken a variety of forms in Howard government discourse — the unemployed as exercisers of consumer choice; the self-reliant entrepreneurial businessman; the conscientious worker who will avoid ‘third party’ (i.e. union or Industrial Relations Commission) involvement to negotiate directly with their employer. In addition there is Howard’s argument that privatisation, for example of Telstra, will encourage the identity of the citizen as share owner. Howard has argued on numerous occasions that he wishes to see Australia becoming a share-owning democracy.

Howard’s arguments regarding ‘mutual obligation’ in which citizens have obligations in return for the provision of minimal government welfare services, and his conception of the ‘social coalition’ in which government, business, charities and individuals co-operate together to provide for those in need, all reflect attempts to encourage the development of a self-reliant citizen with a substantially reduced need for government services. Government reforms are intended to encourage self-reliance and give practical support to people in vulnerable situations, to help them avoid the trap of welfare dependence. Meanwhile, business is encouraged to be more philanthropic as government services decline. Government is attempting to change the behaviour of both businesspeople and potential welfare beneficiaries. Howard argues that his views reflect a combination of a belief in economic liberalisation and modern conservatism, bodies of thought which share common values regarding the role of government, markets and individualism. The idea of citizen entitlements has been replaced by a conception of citizen obligation. While there appears to be a partial abrogation of government responsibility, a passing over of government functions to the private sector and charities, the state also engages in forms of governmentality designed to encourage market relations and particular forms of self-managing and self-regulating behaviour amongst the citizen-clients. As Mitchell Dean has pointed out ‘both neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism share this same diagnosis of the problem of the corruption of the people and the need to lead them to accept their responsibilities and become a virtuous citizenry again.’

The encouragement of self-regulating and self-managing citizen behaviour is reinforced by the failure to provide adequate services. It is also both reinforced and complemented by a return to cruder forms of coercive relations freed-up by dis-establishing state-sanctioned forms of protection, including those that the labour movement had fought so hard to establish. The attempts to bypass the
Industrial Relations Commission in terms of its ability to protect workers, while shoring up its coercive powers is a typical example. Indeed, one could argue that there have been increasing moves in Australia to reinforce particularly crude forms of industrial governance and discipline. Consider an account given by Jennie George, ACTU President, of how Australian Workplace Agreements can work under the Liberal government’s new legislation in ways that reinforce the power of the employer and the dependent position of wage workers needing to obtain and keep jobs.

I know of one case, where employees at a newly opening establishment had authorised the union to be their bargaining agent. However, when told to come in, allegedly for a medical, they were informed that they would not be able to start work unless they signed the AWA, and that they should not involve the union, but tick the box that said they did not have a bargaining agent. The Union brought this to the attention of the [Employment] Advocate, together with evidence that the AWAs seriously disadvantaged employees in relation to award terms and conditions. Nevertheless, the AWAs were approved, with no reasons being given as to why the union’s submissions had been rejected.30

Peter Reith, the minister for industrial relations, claims that his government’s legislation is not anti-union and in fact involves ‘a legal framework within which employers, employees and unions can work together’.31 However, elsewhere he has made it clear that the major purpose of the government’s industrial legislation is to reduce third party intervention in industrial matters whether by unions or the Industrial Relations Commission. As he puts it: ‘the role of unions in Australian industrial relations is a classic example of third party intervention ... what we have provided in our legislation, is a system in which people at work have responsibility for relations between employers and employees and in which they have the opportunity to set the terms and conditions of their employment, ensuring that they actually suit the business.’ He went on to say that ‘this Government is unashamedly pro-business. It is unashamedly pro-small business’.32 The pro-business agenda would be served through increases in productivity arising from ‘more direct co-operative relationships between employers and employees. At the core of this process agreed improvements in pay and conditions can be arrived at based on a shared appreciation by employers and employees of the circumstances, including the economic imperatives, of their particular enterprise or organisation.’33 What Reith does not say is that this ‘shared appreciation’ is also based both on power relations in which employees, who are dependent upon employers for continued employment and advancement, are directly negotiating with those same employers.

Union power, even when it is present, has been weakened by laws designed to constrain their ability to take industrial action and by weakening the scope of the award system.34 Self-regulation combines with coercive power. Howard is
is quite clear that the industrial relations laws are an explicit attempt to change workplace culture in ways that will increase profitability:

Isn’t the most valuable asset that any employer in Australia has a satisfied, well paid, conscientious worker who sees his or her future tied up in the future profitability of the company? It’s that kind of culture that previous industrial relations laws in this country have prevented emerging. It’s that kind of culture which the changes in workplace relations laws in Australia, brought about by my government’s legislation, have made possible.35

Howard similarly talks of changing public service culture to encourage an entrepreneurial spirit and to reduce government services in ways that benefit the private sector. He argues that a ‘cultural change is needed’ in the public service and that ‘I have no doubt cultural change, outsourcing, contracting out, all of that can bring about significant reductions in Government outlays.’36 In short, Howard is encouraging the development of particular forms of self-regulating and self-managing forms of workplace behaviour by employees in both the public and private sectors. However, it is a form of governmentality that is also backed up by very crude forms of employer and state disciplinary power — forms of power which Foucault had briefly acknowledged but never analysed in depth.37

If governmentality in Australian society is partly relying on forms of disciplinary power in the workplace, managing the unemployed would be a particular problem. While the need for wages imposes its own form of external coercion, the unemployed are to a large extent removed from the disciplines of the workplace. Mitchell Dean has provided an interesting Foucauldian analysis of the forms of ethical behaviour that Labor and Liberal government policy have attempted to impose on the unemployed. Dean argues that whereas Labor tended to rely on a state pastoral care model combined with early attempts to encourage the unemployed to practice forms of self-cultivation, regulation and presentation, through training courses designed to shape the unemployed for successful participation in the job market, the Liberal government has gone much further. The retraction of state services and the contracting out of many services previously performed by government employment and training services to the private sector, has led to a situation in which even more emphasis is put on shaping the presentation and behaviour of the unemployed. The introduction of the Job Network changes also increases the pressure on the unemployed to develop and exercise ‘capacities of rational choice as consumers within a market.’38 Contracting out many of the functions of the Commonwealth Employment Service encourages the unemployed to see themselves as consumers able to choose employment agencies. At the same time, targeted groups of unemployed are compelled to work in the work for the dole scheme.39 The work for the dole scheme is not only designed to provide cheap labour but
also to ensure that employees are exposed to the disciplines of the labour market as well as to the disciplines of self-cultivation and consumer choice. In short, the changes in provision of employment services are just one further example of a general trend towards extending the scope of market relations that has been noted by Barry Hindess:

in what is often seen as an ‘economic rationalist’ or ‘neo-liberal’ attack on the welfare state, the concern is not simply to save money but also to promote more efficient patterns of individual and organisational behaviours by bringing market relationships into what had been regarded as non-market spheres of allocation.60

One could add to Hindess’s argument that as manufacturing production declines, service industries, including those previously provided by government in areas such as health, education, child-care, become of even more interest to private capital. Similarly, the growth of new information technology and information markets has seen capital take an even greater interest in previously government owned telecommunications industries. A national capitalist class, threatened by external developments, is even more likely to shore up its profitability by extending and plundering internal markets. Here, as elsewhere, an analysis that draws on Foucauldian insights can be usefully combined with an analysis of economic power and profitability in a capitalist economy. The issue of external economic constraints is one that Foucault neglected. However, it is taken up by another theorist to be utilised in this book, namely, Jürgen Habermas. Habermas’s work has been utilised by Michael Pusey in his influential critique of economic rationalism that will be discussed in the next chapter.

Endnotes

3 Michel Foucault, ‘Afterward: The subject and power’ in Hubert L Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (eds), Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p 221.
5 Ransom, Foucault’s Discipline, p 18.
Neo-Liberalism

19 I have discussed these issues at considerable length in the ‘Introduction’ to Johnson, The Labor Legacy.
20 Barry Hindess, ‘Neo-liberalism and the national economy’ in Dean and Hindess (eds.), Governing Australia, p 224.
21 See Johnson, The Labor Legacy, chapters 3 and 6.
31 Peter Reith, Minister’s speech to the AIC Conference — Waterfront Reform, 13 March 1997.
32 Peter Reith, MP Minister for Industrial Relations, Edited version of a speech to the Townsville Chamber of Commerce, 7 February 1997.
33 Peter Reith, Speaking notes for an address to the American Chamber of Commerce in Australia luncheon, ‘The Workplace Relations Act 1996’, Sydney, Wednesday 7 May 1997, typescript pp 3-4. See also Reith’s, Speaking notes for address as part of the ANU Public Policy Program, ANU Law Lecture Theatre, 24 March 1997.


35 John Howard, Transcript of address to function for the electorate of Bass, Launceston, Tasmania, 7 October 1997, typescript, p 4.


40 Hindess, ‘Neo-Liberalism and the national economy’, p 223.
Chapter Eight

Critiquing Economic Rationalism

We saw in the last chapter that Foucauldian analyses of Australian political discourse can be useful for analysing the techniques of turn of the century neo-liberal government. This chapter draws on another tradition, namely Habermasian perspectives, to explore some of the economic constraints which Foucauldian perspectives neglect. For Habermasian analyses argue that the changing nature of Australian political discourse is caused by the increasing impact of economic imperatives which are allowed to overwhelm social considerations.

In particular, Habermas has influenced a major analysis of Australian political discourse, namely Michael Pusey’s critique of economic rationalism in his 1991 book, Economic Rationalism in Canberra: A Nation Building State Changes its Mind. Pusey is also the author of one of the standard introductions to Habermas’ thought and there is an acknowledged debt to Habermas throughout Economic Rationalism in Canberra. Indeed, John Dryzek has described Pusey’s work as ‘one of the more ambitious social scientific applications of Habermas’ ideas concerning communicative action’ internationally. It will be argued here that Pusey’s work reveals both strengths and weaknesses in Habermas’ analysis.

Habermas and ideological legitimation

In earlier works, such as Toward a Rational Society, Habermas argued that ideological legitimation in capitalist societies no longer takes the form of a liberal belief in an untrammelled market economy in which there is a just exchange between workers selling their labour power and capitalists purchasing it. Capitalist societies moved beyond market liberalism as government intervention in the economy became necessary to shore up the business cycle and working class struggle was rewarded with the development of the welfare state compromise. The legitimating role of market liberalism was replaced by a new technocratic ideology which played a crucial role in modern societies. Economic growth and social development appeared to be determined by scientific-technical progress.

In later works, Habermas continues to argue that market liberalism no longer plays a crucial legitimating role, but he now also endorses the view that ‘technology and science, as an ideological program, have lost much of their public effectiveness’. (This is a view, incidentally, that will be challenged in the next chapter.) Indeed, in works such as The Theory of Communicative Action,
Habermas has moved beyond analyses of ideology and legitimation. As commentators such as Larrain and Thompson have pointed out, Habermas now appears to see ideology as mainly an eighteenth and nineteenth century phenomenon, associated with totalising bodies of thought such as bourgeois ideology, and the responses to it, such as marxism. He argues that ideological cohesion has disappeared in contemporary capitalist societies, to be replaced by a fragmented consciousness that prevents holistic interpretations coming into being. In the process, Habermas apparently endorses the view that the mass party is an ‘ideology-neutral organisation for acquiring power’. Forms of pseudo-consensus are becoming ‘less and less obtainable through ideologies’. Overall, self interest, in the form of responding to rewards and sanctions, has replaced solidaristic commitments, such as class politics, at the level of the state and the economy.

Habermas goes on to claim that the increase in fragmentation and decline of ideological consensus influenced by another factor. Two steering media, money and power, increasingly bypass the need to achieve rationally argued consensus in the sphere of the economy and the state. In other words, steering media are imperatives which impose themselves as inevitable forces which are seen to be beyond the realm of debate. The phenomenon of juridification means that law too, particularly in areas such as social security law, becomes a steering medium in which the problem of justification gives way to the issue of correctly implementing formally correct bureaucratic procedure.

If capitalist growth and development is maintained, the role of steering media will lead to an increasing ‘colonization of the lifeworld’ by the economic and state subsystems. The lifeworld is the realm of culture, society and personality, in which cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization take place.

In short, the lifeworld contains unconscious understandings and assumptions which underlie communicative action. By communicative action, Habermas refers to co-ordinated action requiring agreement; a consensus that is either reached implicitly through shared norms and values or through rational argumentation. Habermas implies that the lifeworld involves a higher level of rationality in order to achieve agreement and consensus than the inadequate forms of rationality present in the sub systems of the economy and the state, where steering media such as money and power bypass the need for rational agreement. Habermas stresses the positive benefits of rationalisation, particularly its emphasis on critical evaluation and argues that, despite its present...
flaws, modern rationality can contribute to the eventual creation of a society in which consensus is achieved through rational argumentation.\textsuperscript{13} In the process, Habermas attempts to salvage aspects of the project of modernity, especially its emphasis on rationality, from attacks by conservatives who include, in his view, some postmodern thinkers.\textsuperscript{16} In other words, his critique of economic and bureaucratic steering media is closely related to his argument that they negate desirable forms of rational, communicative action that can lead to improved forms of economic, political and social life.

**Habermas and Australian analysis: the example of Michael Pusey**

Habermas’ views have strongly influenced Michael Pusey’s trenchant critique of economic rationalist views amongst Australian federal government bureaucrats. Pusey has been criticised for his selective use of Habermas, including his failure to acknowledge Habermas’ critiques of the very form of welfare state which Pusey advocates. For example, Habermas argues that right-wing attacks on the welfare state draw on both the breakdown in solidaristic commitments and legitimate disquiet concerning the normalisation and surveillance practices inherent in the bureaucratisation and professionalisation of social services delivery.\textsuperscript{17} Pusey has also been criticised for combining Habermasian analyses with power elite theory.\textsuperscript{18}

Nonetheless, Pusey’s analysis reveals some of the key features of Habermas’ views that have been discussed here. For example, Pusey argues that economic rationalists in Treasury use ‘money as a steering medium’ that privileges the market and the economic over culture and civil society.\textsuperscript{19} The ‘scientism’ of economic rationalism and its reliance on steering media relegates the social norms and values of the old welfare state to the irredeemably subjective and recognises only the extrinsic criteria of market defined goals.\textsuperscript{20} Departments that had previously operated on the basis of more sociological understandings of needs and inequality, such as Education, are increasingly ‘colonised by the central agency economic rationalists and their ministers’.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, in Pusey’s depiction, economic rationalist practice ‘seems to capture exactly what Habermas explains in his difficult vocabulary, as the “mediatisation of the life-world” — by which he means the uncoupling and conversion of culturally secured meanings, and of social action, into system structures’.\textsuperscript{22} In other words, the Canberra bureaucracy itself becomes a site intimately implicated in the colonisation of the lifeworld by the economic subsystem. Or, as he puts it more bluntly, in societies dominated by economic rationalism, civil society itself becomes ‘the raw material for economic development’ and ‘economic reform has become a technology for converting civil society into a resource for economic growth and production measured by GDP, investment, and deficit reductions’.\textsuperscript{23}
Pusey's work is partly an attempt to use a Habermasian analysis to come to grips with the changes that have occurred in Australian political discourse as market relations override other considerations. The economic rationalists are seen as being qualitatively different from the bureaucrats and politicians of the Whitlam era who were opposed to technocratic discourses and the privileging of the economy and 'sought to reconcile economic management with social integration'.^24 By contrast, the technocratic modelling of economic rationalists means that 'as real social actors (individuals and groups) are bracketed out in the formative moment of the model, so also is the "historical concretion" in which "values", or more accurately norms and identities, might otherwise preserve their relation with means and techniques and, in short, with science'.^25 Pusey does not deny that there are 'new norms' in the laissez-faire state,^26 but he does not examine these norms in any detail, tending, as he does, to see them as related to positivistic denials of social values.

Similarly, while Pusey occasionally refers to economic rationalism as having characteristics of an 'ideology',^27 his emphasis on the technical, steering media-dominated nature of economic rationality means that his analysis of economic rationalism's content and logic rarely goes beyond the responses to his survey of public servants' attitudes. His Habermasian and power-elite perspectives tend to limit his discussion of the extent to which the economic rationalist views of economists and like-minded public servants are influenced by wider forms of political ideology.^28 Indeed, Pusey tends to see liberalism in terms of small 'l' welfare liberalism, rather than a conception that adequately allows for the ideological formations of right-wing, laissez-faire liberalism. Pusey argues that liberalism 'is menacingly political' for economic rationalists since it allows the articulation of social needs and the revivification of a public sphere once characterised by constructive deliberation.^29

Pusey's critique of economic rationalism is therefore closely related to Habermas' conception of rationality and rationalisation. Consequently, Pusey sees little need to analyse the processes of social and economic change that have been alluded to in previous chapters. Rather, he uses Habermasian categories to attempt to understand the influence and nature of economic rationalism. Unfortunately, a narrowly Habermasian conception of the forms of 'rationality' present in the economic and political subsystems limits an understanding of other aspects of Australian political and economic discourse. As pointed out earlier, Habermas argues that the most influential forms of economic and political discourse are debased forms of rational argumentation, in which steering-media rewards and sanctions bypass the need to achieve rationally argued consensus. Those discourses may well not meet Habermas' ideal requirements for 'rational argumentation'. He may, for example, believe that they contain elements of distortion, deception or an inadequate recognition of common interests. He may well wish to dispute claims that economic rewards
are sufficient to meet human needs or lead to a greater quality of life. Nonetheless, the most influential forms of Australian political and economic discourse do contain detailed arguments about achieving the ‘general interest’. In fact, it is argued that self-interested calculations of utility are actually in the ‘general interest’.

This argument constitutes one of the key arguments of liberalism. As David Green has noted, ‘the belief that the selfishness of producers can be channelled by competition and wise laws so that, despite their selfish aims, they end by serving others has been a vital part of the liberal viewpoint’; one that stretches from Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith to modern liberal thinkers.\(^{30}\) Liberalism provides the essential links between the economic and political sphere, between individual self-interest and a particular conception of the collective good, between the economy and liberal democracy. Underlying such arguments are particular conceptions of what is ‘good’ and ‘desirable’ for society.\(^{31}\) They represent norms and values that are very influential in mainstream political and economic discourse. However, Habermas persists in seeing market methods of social integration as opposed to integration achieved through shared norms and values.\(^{32}\) A number of critics have expressed doubts regarding Habermas’ inability to ‘explain how values become part of normal political processes’.\(^{33}\)

In short, Habermas underestimates the degree of ideological cohesion and consensus in western society, as well as the prevalence of norms and values at the level of both the economy and the state. He places too much emphasis on the fragmentation of consciousness. Above all, he fails to discuss adequately the extent to which market relations are discursively constructed; an issue which was discussed in depth in the previous chapter. The Habermasian problem is the opposite to the critique made here of many Foucauldians, namely that Foucauldians neglect the impact of market relations on political and economic discourse and the role of the state. In short, one needs to analyse both discursive and extra-discursive aspects of market relations, and the complex intersections between the two. At the same time, Habermas’ emphasis on external steering-media also means that he neglects important forms of self-regulating and self-managing behaviour by liberal citizens that Foucauldian analyses of governmentality do address. A more adequate account is needed which analyses the ways in which market relations are themselves used to construct forms of consensus and common interest.

Examples of consensus and cohesion in Australian political discourse

Some Australian examples are pertinent here since social harmony or consensus elements are a crucial part of political and economic discourse in Australian society, although they are elements that can take a variety of forms in different
versions of liberal ideology. Liberal ideology does not have to rely on a substantial ‘welfare state compromise’. Indeed, as pointed out in chapter two, even under Labor, welfare benefits were increasingly narrowly targeted in Australia, and real wages dropped, while the government successfully renegotiated successive accords with the trade union movement. Discourse about the nature of capitalist economies has played a significant role in the process. For example, Australian Labor governments consistently argued that a healthy capitalist economy is in the interests of all groups in Australian society, including welfare recipients, business and labour. Bob Hawke’s statement at the opening of the Economic Summit sums up this view particularly succinctly.

So often in our affairs the emphasis has been put upon the competing struggle between wage and salary earners and business, and residually, welfare recipients. I believe that we must come to put the emphasis upon the fact that they all have a common interest. They all seek the same thing — the maintenance, and through time, an improvement, of their standards of living. The indispensable condition for the achievement of this common legitimate goal is real economic growth — an increase in the per capita output of goods and services.34

Hawke’s views on consensus were substantially endorsed by Keating who argued that ‘conflict in the workplace is not a quintessentially Australian way of operating. It is now known world-wide that we are about achieving efficient economic reforms in an environment of co-operation, consultation and consensus’.35 Keating also endorsed economic growth, arguing that ‘our country’s success is best measured — and best achieved — by policies which enable all to share in the bounty of the nation. And we believe that the starting point is economic growth — which is the means to creating a bounty big enough to share’.36 In other words, far from steering media such as money being used to bypass the need for consensus formation, they can be key elements in arguments for consensus in capitalist society. In short, while such passages reveal the pervasive influence of the economic rewards and sanctions which Habermas rightly draws attention to, their ideological influence is partly so great because they can be seen as being in the general, rather than merely the individual, interest.

The Liberal Party also stresses the common interests of all Australians in economic growth. Many Liberal formulations have distinct similarities with those of the Labor Party but place greater emphasis on the beneficial effects of individual self-interest, free from government intervention. Howard’s 1988 Liberal policy document, Future Directions, states this view particularly clearly.

Individual initiative combined with private enterprise is the foundation of economic growth and prosperity which alone can provide rising real incomes for all Australian families; funds for investment; an increasing capacity to help
those in real need; and the supply of additional funds for defence, law and order and other areas of government responsibility.

Or, as Howard was to state seven years later in one of his Headland speeches, Liberals ‘take it as fundamental that sustaining and maintaining a fair and compassionate society in which individuals have the opportunity to succeed and prosper through their own initiative and endeavour requires a productive, competitive and growing economy’. While this book concentrates on analysing government discourse, it should be pointed out that the emphasis on social harmony, general interests and consensus decision-making is not confined to political parties or the views of elite public servants. Australian trade union documents such as *Australia Reconstructed* also stressed the common interests of employers and employees in a healthy economy. Yet another version of social harmony, consensus arguments appear in Australian New Right literature which emphasises the common interests arising from neo-liberal economic agendas. Once again, New Right views on the general interest would obviously be very different from those of the trade union movement, especially in their attitudes to equity, labour market regulation and government intervention. Nonetheless, the important point is that, in the various forms, Labor Party, Liberal Party, ACTU and New Right documents all contain central arguments regarding consensus and the national interest. These arguments are backed up by detailed argument and analysis.

It could also be argued that they are all examples of what Stuart Hall has termed ‘variants of liberalism’. This chapter cannot cover the general discussions regarding the diverse nature of Australian liberalism put forward by commentators such as Rowse, Brugger and Jaensch, and Emy and Hughes. Nonetheless, there are some aspects that are worth drawing attention to. The Liberal Party and the New Right’s views are closer to classical, laissez-faire liberalism which saw governments as having a negligible role to play in the economy, given that the general interest would be better served by unfettered individual entrepreneurial activity. The Labor government is influenced by some elements of laissez-faire liberalism in so far as it believes that markets have an important role to play in the economy. However, the government is also influenced, along with the trade union movement, by versions of welfare liberalism which argue that limited intervention is important in areas such as social welfare, labour market regulation and managing cyclical downturns in the capitalist economy. Such intervention would, it was argued, benefit the economy as a whole as well as improve standards of living. The decline of Keynesian economics caused the Hawke and Keating Labor governments to be less influenced by welfare liberalism than some of their predecessors but they still saw government as having a greater role to play in the economy than most Liberals do. The important point about liberalism for our purposes here, is the
various ways in which liberal thought attempts to reconcile the private pursuit of wealth with the ‘general interest’. In the process it also attempts to reconcile the norms of the economy with the more universalist norms of the liberal democratic state. The variants of liberalism discussed here meet some of Habermas’ own conditions for ideological thought given the totalising elements revealed in their emphases on consensus and social harmony and their appeals for partners to struggle together to develop the economy. Yet, in Habermas’ views such forms of ideology have been replaced by fragmentation of consciousness in capitalist societies.

Were Habermas to acknowledge the discourses of cohesion and consensus that have been discussed, he would no doubt argue that they were not based on rational argumentation. In short, a genuine public debate is not taking place but rather a bargaining exercise between groups pursuing their own interests. Certainly, Australian public debate and decision-making processes would bear little relation to those processes Habermas outlines in depth in works such as *Between Facts and Norms* or in his later political essays. Furthermore, he could argue that the forms of consensus were narrowly economistic in that sustaining a healthy and growing economy is seen as a self-justifying goal whose validity-claims are not subjected to rigorous contestation. He might suggest that an emphasis on economistic demands undermines adequate debates about quality of life that are raised by social movements, for example by environment or women’s movements. He could argue that economic rewards and sanctions involve a degree of coercion that undermines rational discussion. He could argue that some groups in society, such as business, are not being honest about their real ‘interests’, for example in generating personal wealth, that may not be compatible with the interests of other groups in society. He could argue that welfare recipients and social movements are being marginalised by groups such as trade unions and big business. Perversely then, there is the potential in Habermas’ work for a critique of many features of current Australian political discourse and it is this potential which Michael Pusey has partially developed. Market imperatives have tended to overwhelm other political and economic discourses. Needless to say, left and feminist critics have mounted detailed critiques of arguments that economic growth and increased profitability in the private sector will ‘trickle down’ to benefit all sections of the community. However, such critiques are beyond the scope of this present chapter. What is relevant here is that Habermasian analyses seem to be neglecting the ideological factors that can contribute to arguments in favour of cohesion and consensus in western, capitalist society; a point that is significant regardless of whether one believes that governments’ attempts at ideological cohesion were successful in either their own terms or Habermas’.

In the process, Habermasian analyses also fail to acknowledge the attempted mediations between the social and the economic that are possible even in right-wing liberal thought. For example, neither Habermas nor Pusey adequately
foresees a situation, such as occurred under the Keating government, when
governments attempt to influence the construction of social movement identity
groups in ways that are compatible with right-wing economic discourse. This
possibility is allowed for even less by Pusey, given his argument that ‘real social
actors (individuals and groups) are bracketed out in the formative moment’ of
economic rationalist models along with norms and identities. For Keating, as
we saw in chapter two, there was no incompatibility between social norms,
such as support for tolerance and diversity, and the norms of the market. There
was also, for Keating, a high degree of compatibility between culture and the
market, particularly in the context of new information technology and the
information markets which it spawned. Nor can the Keating government’s
conception of the role of social groups really be explained in terms of
fragmentation or a breakdown of solidaristic commitments, given the emphasis
both on group identity and shared, national goals.

In other words, while one could extrapolate from Habermas’ model to see
what was happening under Keating as a version of colonisation of the lifeworld
by the economic subsystem, it is a particular version which Habermas’ own analysis
could not anticipate. Furthermore, Habermas’ model, and Pusey’s development
of it, tends to assume an antagonism and separation between the social, cultural
and economic which is not shared in Keating’s version of an economic rationalist
model. This is not to deny that one could make a case for arguing that the
antagonism is present but it is to suggest that Habermas’ and Pusey’s analyses of
economistic discourses fail to understand their full complexity. In some ways,
there are even more problems in applying aspects of Habermas’ and Pusey’s
model to the Howard period. The reason is, as pointed out in chapter three, that
Howard’s version of economic rationalism is deeply imbued with social values,
albeit ones that neither Habermas nor Pusey would share. Howard’s conception
of rational economic man is shaped by social and cultural values influenced by
gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality. It is not a pure subjugation of the social to
the economic at all. The contrast with Keating’s views indicates how much
conceptions of the market and the economic are being socially shaped, just as
much as the social is being shaped by Howard’s economics. Habermas and
Pusey are prevented from fully appreciating such dynamics because of an implicit
assumption that the economic and the social are inherently opposed. One is
reminded of Nancy Fraser’s feminist critique that Habermas’ view of the opposition
between system and lifeworld is androcentric in many respects since it ‘fails to
theorize the patriarchal norm-mediated character of late capitalist official economic
and administrative systems. Likewise, it fails to theorize the systemic, money —
and power — mediated character of male dominance in the domestic sphere of the
late capitalist lifeworld.’ In short, Fraser argues for a more multidirectional
and interrelated conception of the relationship between economy and society,
‘system’ and ‘lifeworld’. 
Despite its inadequacies, one would not want to deny the insights that can be drawn from Habermas's theory in a period in which, under both Labor and the Liberals, increasing areas of social life from welfare and utility provision to education are being forced to implement versions of market relations. Nor would one wish to deny that many people who disagree with market-driven norms and values feel that they have no economic choice but to comply with market-driven rationalities. It is here that Habermasian arguments regarding steering-media have some force but it is an insight that Habermasians take too far by neglecting discursive and ideological factors. Habermas' thought also neglects the role which technological justifications play in legitimating market liberalism and it is to that issue that the next chapter will turn.

Endnotes

* A much earlier version of some of these arguments appeared in Carol Johnson, ‘Applying Habermas to Australian political culture’, Australian Journal of Political Science, vol 27, no 1, 1992, pp 55-70.


4 Habermas, Toward a Rational Society, pp 89, 105.


7 Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action, vol 2, p 396.

8 Habermas, Habermas: Autonomy and Solidarity, p 184.

9 Because Habermas' views have developed considerably since his earlier works, this chapter largely refers to works published in the last fifteen years.


14 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol 2, p 183
28 This problem continues in his later work, see eg. Michael Pusey, ‘Economic rationalism and the contest for civil society’, pp 69-86.
31 Pusey’s survey questions are unlikely to elicit responses that discuss the relationship between individual and general interests in laissez-faire liberal views. See Appendix A to *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*.
33 Hugh Baxter, ‘System and lifeworld’, p 69; Thomas McCarthy, ‘Complexity and democracy, or the seductions of systems theory’, *New German Critique*, no 35, 1985, p 34.
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49 For detailed critiques of the limitations of the Hawke government’s appeals to consensus see Johnson, *The Labor Legacy* and ‘Whose consensus’.
51 Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices, Power Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p 137. For an in-depth feminist engagement with Habermas see Johanna Meehan (ed.), *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse*, Routledge, New York, 1995. However, Pusey does acknowledge the impact of economic steering-media on women within the family, see ‘The impact of economic restructuring on women and families: Preliminary findings from the Middle Australia Project’, *AQ*, vol 70, no 4, July-August 1998, pp 18-27.
Chapter Nine

Political Ideology and Discourse in the Age of Cyberculture: Government, the Economy and Technology

In many ways, a chapter on political ideology and discourse in the age of new information technology is a particularly fitting one to have as the final new topic in this book. Information technology is playing an increasingly important role in political discourse. Conceptions of the market, the economic, the social and the cultural are currently being transformed by the perceived impact of new information technology and the development of information markets. Meanwhile, arguments about the role of new information technology in creating globalisation are used to justify free market policies.

New information technology links the broader theme of the challenges which the turn of the century poses to more traditional Australian government discourse with many of the theoretical perspectives discussed in previous chapters. The case of new information technology also demonstrates the utility of judiciously combining different approaches — including insights from both the modernist and postmodernist traditions whose more general features were explained in chapter six. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard draws attention to the impact of technological transformations on the nature of knowledge as it becomes ‘an informational commodity indispensable to productive power’. As we saw in the last chapter, Habermas originally argued that the legitimating role of market liberalism was replaced by a new modernist, technocratic ideology in which economic growth and social development appeared to be determined by scientific-technical progress. Consequently, public debate is constrained by the preponderance of technical issues. Later on, Habermas revised important elements of his previous analysis, arguing that technocratic ideology had lost its public effectiveness. The material analysed in this chapter will suggest that technocratic discourse has far from lost its effectiveness — a point which may suggest that Habermas’ earlier views were more accurate. However, Habermas was talking about technocratic ideologies that gave partial support to Keynesian economic policy and the welfare state. It will be argued here that the commodification of information, noted by Lyotard, has facilitated the interlacing of technological determinism and support for various forms of market liberalism.

Foucault’s views also have some relevance here. Given the fact that his conception of technologies tended to concentrate on techniques of governance
in the broadest sense, his views will not be discussed in any detail in this chapter. Nonetheless, Foucault pointed out that techniques of governance involve processes where ‘problems’ are identified, theories ‘constitute new sectors of reality and make new fields of existence practicable’ and domains such as ‘the economy’ are conceptualised and constituted. He also drew attention to the role of professional expertise in establishing regimes of truth. A major argument in this chapter will be that what constitutes the economy, and the techniques of government appropriate to it, is indeed being redefined in the context of globalised, new information markets. In the process, free market discourse is drawing on a powerful combination of technological, scientific and economic expertise to justify the implementation of trade liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation and corporatisation. Indeed, for some commentators, access to new information technology becomes the key issue of social inequality, relegating other factors to the past. For all these reasons, it is essential that this book examines the impact of new information technology on Australian political discourse. Although this book discusses Australian material, it should be noted that similar arguments about new information markets can be found in speeches by a range of politicians internationally, including Bill Clinton and Tony Blair.

Technology and Australian political discourse

It is not new for science and technology and technological and scientific expertise to be celebrated in Australian culture. As John Nieuwenhuizen has noted: ‘Our society puts science on a pedestal in many ways, so much so that the onward march of technology seems inevitable.’ Sociologists of science have long pointed out the prevalence of forms of technological determinism which see technology as an autonomous (and largely unassailable force) impinging on society from the outside. By contrast, MacKenzie and Wajcman point out that a range of social and economic relations, from gender relations to considerations of private profitability, can shape the development of technology. Such an awareness has been almost totally lacking in Australian government discourse in the last two decades of this century. Technological determinism has been reigning supreme in much government rhetoric, despite the reservations of well informed politicians such as Barry Jones. The development of science and technology has long been seen as central to developing the economy and general standards of living. However, it is now argued that the application of new information technology is driving changes in the very nature of the economy. Definitions of the economy are being extended to acknowledge the importance of information markets. The economy is being seen in increasingly cultural terms. Meanwhile, it is argued that the internationalisation of the economy, facilitated by new information technology, absolutely necessitates trade liberalisation and deregulation. In short, a particular, late twentieth century
form of technological determinism is being harnessed to the cause of neo-liberal ideology. Culture is being conceived as a site for government economic policy. The following section of this chapter will consider Labor and Liberal government approaches to these issues.

The Labor period

During the period of the Hawke government, technological development still tended to be seen in terms of technical innovation in manufacturing industry. This understanding of the role of technology in the economy was a fairly traditional one with precursors, for example, in the Curtin and Chifley Labor governments’ attempts to develop new manufacturing technology in the postwar period. Barry Jones has complained that, despite his best efforts, neither Prime Minister Hawke, Treasurer Keating nor Industry Minister Button was prepared to meet with Bill Gates when he first visited Australia in 1984. However, by the end of Keating’s period in office, conceptions of technological development were shaped far less by a concern with innovation in manufacturing industry, although that remained as a subordinate strand. Rather, communications technology became the industry of the future with substantial implications for conceptions of the cultural and the economic.

Technology had an important role to play in the Keating government’s attempts to reshape Australian identities in ways that were compatible with the government’s economic and social objectives. Reconstructing national identity was part of the brave new twenty-first century information and cultural economy envisaged in documents such as Creative Nation. Keating celebrated the diverse influences on Australian culture since there were ‘huge economic benefits to flow from a confident and secure, innovative and imaginative culture’ in an ‘era of globalisation and the information revolution’. Diversity was an advantage since the language and cultural skills of different ethnic groups could be harnessed to Australia’s export drive. For Keating, cultural matters became inseparable from the economic. Keating argued that cultural industries would make an essential contribution to the Australian economy in a period of economic transformation and the development of new multimedia information markets. Information technology and culture were intertwined and the cultural had a major role to play in adding value, generating employment, and developing Australia’s export industries. In the words of the Labor government’s cultural policy document, Creative Nation:

This cultural policy is also an economic policy. Culture creates wealth.... Culture employs.... Culture adds value.... It is a valuable export in itself and an essential accompaniment to the export of other commodities. It attracts tourists and students. It is essential to our economic success.
Keating argued that the changes generated by the information revolution were totally compatible with Labor’s inclusive and equitable vision for the future since ‘the communications revolution ... suits our social ambitions — our egalitarian and inclusive ambitions’. It is hard to know exactly what Keating was thinking of when he referred to the compatibility of the communications revolution and Australia’s social ambitions. Only six months before, for example, the government had been presented with a discussion paper drawing attention to the relative exclusion of women in the areas of science, engineering and technology. Probably, Keating was thinking of the links between social diversity and economic performance that have already been discussed. However, he was also probably thinking of the ambitious equity claims made for the internet by people such as Bill Gates. Gates argues that the internet can substantially overcome existing inequalities in access to crucial resources:

One of the wonderful things about the information highway is that virtual equity is far easier to achieve than real-world equity. It would take a massive amount of money to give every grammar school in every poor area the same library resources as the schools in Beverly Hills. However, when you put schools on the on-line, they all get the same access to information, wherever it might be stored. We are all created equal in the virtual world, and we can use this equality to help address some of the sociological problems that society has yet to solve in the physical world. The network will not eliminate barriers of prejudice or inequality, but it will be a powerful force in that direction.

Bill Gates reportedly had a ‘highly animated’ 90 minute meeting with Keating during an Australian visit. He had been particularly impressed by Keating’s knowledge of, and similar economic thinking on, new information technology issues, including the appropriate role for government in providing infrastructural incentives for private enterprise. Gates’ views, it should be noted, gain their authority from a heady combination of enormous wealth and power combined with technological expertise.

The other side of Gates’ argument regarding equality is the increasing belief that access to internet resources, and educational training for the information age, are now the fundamental equity issues. British social policy analyst Michael Cahill has drawn attention to claims ‘that we now live in an “information society” where information has replaced capital and labour as one of the fundamental variables of society’. Cahill is sceptical of such claims, pointing to continued patterns of social and class inequality, although he rightly agrees that ‘the inequalities of the information age need to be tackled before they become an inbuilt and accepted feature’. Nonetheless, the emphasis on inequities in access to information technology had a considerable influence on Labor government policy. In Beyond the Safety Net: The Future of Social Security, Peter Baldwin, the minister for social security, had drawn attention to the need to
redefine conceptions of inequality and poverty. In particular, he noted the risk that society would increasingly be divided into ‘the information rich and the information poor’ — an issue that had originally been highlighted by Barry Jones, when he was minister for science some seven years before.\(^{26}\) Consequently, Baldwin proposed the establishment of computer networks that would enable social security recipients to use the net to access services, including information regarding potential jobs.\(^{27}\) It is interesting that Baldwin does not discuss any of the literature regarding gender, racial, ethnic or other inequalities that are present in both the usage and design of technology. For example, there is an extensive feminist literature addressing the gender biases present in the content and control of technology, including new information technology.\(^{28}\) Nor did Baldwin address arguments that the private enterprise development of new information technology will in fact entrench, and possibly exacerbate, the existing economic inequalities which Cahill has drawn attention to.\(^{29}\)

In a justification of the Labor government’s privatisation policy, Kim Beazley argued that the key issue for social democrats at the end of the twentieth century was not the outdated one of controlling physical capital, such as the ‘commanding heights of the economy’, but rather the issue of ‘investment in human capital’ to enable the people, and the private sector, to prosper during the information revolution.\(^{30}\) One should not be surprised that new information technology was used to justify privatisation, it was also often used to justify policies of financial deregulation on the grounds that new financial communications systems made national regulation of banking impracticable.\(^{31}\) Labor has been expressing stronger support for government provision and industry assistance since the Keating electoral defeat. Beazley has particularly criticised the current Liberal government for not using public sector purchasing to create critical mass markets for Australian information technology. He has opposed the total sale of Telstra, pointing out that Telstra has supported the local electronics industry as part of its community obligations.\(^{32}\) However, Beazley has certainly not totally rejected his previous economic rationalist perspectives. He was quick to reassure business observers at the 1998 ALP National Conference that Labor was ‘the firm that brought you ... healthy corporate profits year after year’ and sold the vision of ‘an Australia that was a real player in the push for free trade’.\(^{33}\) Beazley is attempting to meld market approaches with a more substantial role for state assistance and provision than the Liberals would advocate. In the process, he is partly drawing on employment and industry policy perspectives from the Keating period but sometimes going beyond them.

The Labor party has also retained a strong emphasis on the need to educate the population for the new information age. Keating argues that, from the beginning, increasing access to education was integral to the Labor government’s strategy for training the population to be part of the information society since ‘a
decade ago, anyone in public life should have known that information was the way that value was going to be added’. For this reason, ‘right from 1983, we went out of our way to try and build the base. I mean you can’t have an information, knowledge-based society if only three kids in ten complete year twelve.’ The government’s policies in the school, technical education and tertiary sector should be seen in this light. The emphasis on educating the population for the information society is still there in opposition Labor Party documents. Mark Latham, former shadow minister for education and youth affairs, is a particularly strong advocate of the argument that the role of knowledge has changed in the new information economy. The most crucial role the state can play in looking after its workforce, preventing pockets of economic inequality, and attracting globally mobile capital, is to provide good quality education that trains citizens as highly skilled knowledge workers who can adapt to the dismantling of job security. Such views are also reflected in the Australian Labor Party 1998 platform’s emphasis on new information industries and developing human capital through education. They continue to be a central argument in key speeches by Kim Beazley.

In short, the Labor period saw significant changes in the governments’ conceptions of culture and the economy. The Keating government conceived cultural diversity in ways that were compatible with their conception of a transformed Australian economy. Arguments about the impact of new information technology were also shaping Labor attitudes towards inequality and government ownership and regulation. Labor incorporated perspectives on new information technology into its version of neo-liberal ideology. As we shall see, the Liberal government has also used arguments about the impact of new information technology to justify neo-liberalism, but a version of neo-liberalism that, as already suggested in earlier chapters, is somewhat different than Labor’s.

The Howard government

Given Howard’s opposition to the forms of social and cultural change envisaged by the Keating government and detailed in chapter two, the Howard government’s engagement with new information technology was to be very different from Keating’s. It is also an instructive example of how the cultural changes involved with new information technology need not involve agendas that stress diversity and inclusiveness. In other words, the content purveyed through the new information technologies can just as easily be ‘conservative’ as ‘progressive’. There is nothing implicit in the new technologies that determines content. On the contrary, new information technologies merely open up even more pressing sites of political and cultural contestation, as current debates over internet censorship graphically reveal.
Keating’s vision of the brave new cultural economy was generally very different from Howard’s. In a speech prior to the ’96 election, Howard had attacked Keating for being obsessed with the information superhighway and not paying sufficient attention to the implications of technological change for issues such as employer/employee relations and traditional notions of going out to work.\(^{38}\) In short, Howard interpreted the impact of new information technology predominantly in terms of the need for a New Right program of labour market deregulation. Howard also saw culture in very different ways. He was concerned with the very prosaic aim of changing workplace culture in order to increase profitability:

Isn’t the most valuable asset that any employer in Australia has a satisfied, well paid, conscientious worker who sees his or her future tied up in the future profitability of the company? It’s that kind of culture that previous industrial relations laws in this country have prevented emerging. It’s that kind of culture which the changes in workplace relations laws in Australia, brought about by my government’s legislation, have made possible.\(^ {39}\)

Howard was a relative latecomer to the hype surrounding new information economies. A major turning point appears to have been a meeting that Howard had with Alan Greenspan, of the U.S. Federal Reserve, who convinced him that one of the reasons for the American economy’s jobs growth was ‘that at long last it was getting the huge benefits of technological change and technological development’.\(^ {40}\) Consequently, Howard argued that the information revolution ‘represents potentially the greatest transformation in the world economy since the industrial revolution.’ Howard stressed ‘the contribution that information technology can make ... to the creation of thousands of jobs over the years, immediately ahead of us into the 21st century’.\(^ {41}\) (The government’s job projections appear to have been based purely on extrapolating Australian numbers from U.S. projections for worldwide job creation after technology ‘displacement effects’.\(^ {42}\))

Technology and globalisation become inexorably linked with free market policies since globalisation opens up opportunities for internationally competitive economies but threatens economies that are not. In Howard’s view: ‘information technology and telecommunications — are the most powerful drivers of globalisation’ since ‘the notion of purely domestic markets is becoming obsolete with the spread of use of the internet’.\(^ {43}\) Consequently, governments must ensure that their economies are globally competitive and ‘the correct response to globalisation is more liberalisation, not less. More change, not less.’ The projected resulting high growth will help to ease the pain of rapid social and economic change.\(^ {44}\) Similarly, a major government industry statement argues that the development of the information economy must be driven by the private sector and market forces. Government’s job is merely to provide a pragmatic framework to facilitate private sector activity.\(^ {45}\)
New information technology and free markets

The link between developments in new information technology, globalisation and the need for relatively free market policies is far more contentious than either Labor or Liberal governments have acknowledged. As pointed out earlier in chapter two, numerous commentators have argued that a period of globalisation in fact necessitates new forms of government intervention and regulation if Australia is to prosper in the increasingly internationalised economy.46

There are also particular problems with relying on market forces in a period of globalisation characterised by the capital mobility and knowledge industries related to new information technology. Hearn, Mandeville and Anthony have pointed out that:

the market system does not cope well with the fundamental features of the emerging new era: complexity and information. In particular, the market, left to itself, will not provide vision and direction, nor will it encourage clusters of firms to work together on either technology or market development.47

Furthermore, as Saskia Sassen has argued, based on an analysis of new information technology and the finance industry, many of the analyses of globalisation neglect consideration of firstly, the local infrastructure and work processes which facilitate the global economy and, secondly, the role played by nation states in facilitating global economic relations and the legal forms which are necessary for the global economic system to operate. Once these are factored in, there becomes much more opportunity for nation states, particularly highly developed ones, to intervene in national and international regulatory processes.48 It also becomes clearer how much of a role neo-liberal governments have themselves played in facilitating globalisation.49 As Sassen points out, a "key property of the current era is that the more that national states implement deregulation to raise the competitiveness of their nations and localities within them, the more they contribute to strengthen transnational networks and actors".50 A similar conundrum has been noted in the case of Australian communications policy. Patrick Hughes acknowledges the increasing difficulties internationalisation and new communications technology pose for governments trying to regulate communications industries. However, he argues that governments have also consistently failed to acknowledge that their own policies of re-regulation, contracting out and privatisation have themselves "been major driving forces behind globalisation in communications".51 Needless to say, communications is not the only Australian policy area in which this conundrum is not explored.
One of Howard’s first steps after his ‘conversion’ on new information technology, as Laurie Oakes has termed it, was to announce that Richard Alston’s new portfolio would be extended to minister for communications, the information economy and the arts. Long before Howard had extended his portfolio, Alston had endorsed the following description by cyber-guru Nicholas Negroponte of the everyday implications of the technological revolution:

Early in the next millennium your right and left cuff links or earings may communicate with each other by low-orbiting satellites and have more computer power than your present PC. Your telephone won’t ring indiscriminately; it will receive, sort and perhaps respond to your incoming calls like a well-trained English butler. Mass media will be redefined by systems for transmitting and receiving personalised information and entertainment. Schools will change to become more like museums and playgrounds for children to assemble ideas and socialise with other children all over the world. The digital planet will look and feel like the head of a pin.

Alston then went on to endorse Daniel Petre’s argument that there was only going to be ‘a five-year window of opportunity in which to boost our national prosperity through exploiting the rich intellectual resources in this sector and creating a superior on-line economy’. (According to Business Review Weekly, Petre was at the time a Microsoft Corporation vice-president and Bill Gates’ ‘key executive in Australia ... responsible for much of the strategic negotiations involving special interest groups in Australia’.) Needless to say, the government’s contribution was not going to take the form of industry assistance or intervention. Rather, it would be in the form of ‘removing the final barriers to full and open competition’ in the telecommunications industry because ‘if technology is the engine of hope, then competition is the fuel that drives it’. Alston argued that the Liberal government’s telecommunications legislation would provide Australians with the opportunity ‘to be at the forefront of the on-line revolution’. The Liberal government’s support for full privatisation of Telstra is a logical extension of such policies. Alston’s aim is to ensure that Australia becomes not only ‘a significant player in the new global information economy’ but also ‘a preferred hub for investment both in and for the Asia-Pacific region’ by fully utilising our geographical and time zone proximity to Asia.

Alston claims that Bill Gates’ briefing to Cabinet in March 1998 confirmed the view that Australia was one of the two most attractive countries for new information technology operations in the region. The other was Singapore, but Australia was seen to have an advantage in terms of being an English language nation. The fact that Gates was asked to brief Cabinet, an honour normally
reserved for figures such as visiting heads of state, is itself highly unusual and a
sign of how important the government sees new information technology to be.
It also raises issues about the power of the new multi-media conglomerates and
their influence on government media and communications policy. Gates is hardly
a disinterested observer. In 1997 the Packer empire hired Daniel Petre (the
former prominent Microsoft employee, mentioned earlier, whose writings had
been favourably cited by Alston). Petre was instrumental in developing a joint
venture between Kerry and James Packer and Bill Gates to provide Nine
Network entertainment programs to an online network with the possibility of
later expanding their services into interactive television. The Liberal
Government’s position on the introduction of Digital television was commonly
seen to favour free-to-air providers such as Packer over Rupert Murdoch’s
combined print and pay TV interests.

Like his Labor predecessors, Alston also acknowledged that the information
economy could lead to a widening of the division between the ‘information
haves’ and the ‘information have-nots’ but argued that government can help to
prevent such divisions through the education system and by providing online
access to government information and services. Once again, issues such as
gender inequality seem to be neglected. For example, the Liberal government
has refused to respond to the Women in Science, Engineering and Technology
Advisory Group (WISET) report on female inequality in science, engineering
and technology (SET), arguing that the Discussion Paper’s recommendations
were more relevant to the outlook of the Labor government. The problems
identified by WISET included a dominant technological culture in which masculine
behaviour ‘expresses a strong sense of masculine ownership of the whole area
of SET, as an area of knowledge, as an area of study, as an area of research
and as an area of employment’. Furthermore, the discussion paper found that
‘a second common characteristic of the behaviour is that it consistently
emphasises solidarity and shared identity, values and interests between men
and boys in such a way that it excludes, alienates, marginalises and isolates the
girls and women who are, by definition, the outsiders’.

Political economy rather than equity is the dominant issue in current
government reports which stress both the importance of new information
technology for Australian economic development and the need to engage in
free market, deregulatory policies. At times, the language of these reports is
almost lyrical. One government report sees the internet as ‘a new silk road’
comparable to the ancient silk road which ‘was a vital corridor’ via which
‘commerce flourished; news, ideas, goods and technologies were exchanged;
East and West were linked’. All the reports argue that new information
technology is transforming the economy. An information policy advisory report
took as a given that ‘the information society — underpinned by the pervasive
influence of new electronic interfaces and the realities of a global online economy
is creating a new political economy.\textsuperscript{67} The report also stressed the widespread implications of the changes taking place for conceptions of governance and the economic. In the report's words:

Some have referred to this new political economy as a 'Commonwealth of Information', suggesting the emergence of new political and economic boundaries and new sources of identity. 'Community' as well as consumption is becoming a smorgasbord of individual choice. In this world of borderless electronic coordination, sovereign governments are 'reinventing' their concepts of jurisdiction and their sources of authority.\textsuperscript{68}

I have argued in this chapter that part of 'reinventing their concepts of jurisdiction and their sources of authority' involves a new conceptualisation of the economy as a governable terrain, one in which the cultural, informational and the economic are indissolubly intertwined, at least for important sectors of the economy. Meanwhile, the combined 'authorities' of science, technology and economics are evoked to justify free market policies. However, not surprisingly, the Howard and Keating governments' reworkings of these regimes are very different. Whereas Keating saw the information revolution as justifying conceptions of cultural diversity and inclusiveness, Howard sees the information revolution in terms of free market economics and abstract individuals. His conception of the nexus between the cultural and the economic does not involve commodified group identities and niche markets. Howard still sees the economic as necessitating cuts to 'special interest' groups, rather than advocating a socially inclusive form of neo-liberalism such as Keating's. His conception of the information economy is also narrower than Keating's, particularly in its conception of the role of cultural economies.\textsuperscript{69} In other words, the analysis here is quite compatible with the analysis in chapters two and three of this book which stressed the different forms of neo-liberalism developed by the Labor and Liberal governments — one that was inclusive of diverse social groups and one which took a more socially exclusionary form.

As we shall see, the issue of the relationship between technology, government, culture and the economy is one that has been explored in a number of theoretical and analytical approaches. However, none of them provides a fully adequate explanation. Rather, it is necessary to draw on elements from a variety of approaches as well as adapting them to current Australian conditions.

\textbf{Theory and technology}

Close connections between technology, the cultural, political and economic are not confined to the information age, even though they may be becoming ever more pressing issues. In 1964, Marcuse wrote in \textit{One Dimensional Man} that
in the sphere of technology ‘culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives. ... Technological rationality has become political rationality.’ 70 Jürgen Habermas dedicated his 1968 essay ‘Technology and Science as “Ideology”’ to Marcuse for his seventieth birthday. In that essay, Habermas doesn’t anticipate an integration of the technological, cultural and economic in the forms we have been discussing above. On the contrary, as already indicated, Habermas argues in some depth that the form of capitalist ideology studied by Marx, in which capitalism was legitimated on the basis of a belief that markets were based on a fair and equal exchange between workers and employers, was no longer functional. In his view, the theory of just exchange had collapsed when increasing state intervention and welfare provision became necessary to shore up the economy. The technocratic role of science and technology in developing productive forces had undermined the legitimacy of market-based beliefs and had contributed to new forms of technocratic economic and social planning. Consequently, technology and science had taken ‘on the function of legitimating political power’.71 A passive role for the masses was justified on the grounds of expertise, while forms of technocratic governance were necessary to administer a ‘state-regulated capitalism’. 72 It should be noted that Habermas and Marcuse were certainly not alone at the time in seeing technology being used for technocratic forms of government regulation. As late as 1974, post-industrial society and ‘end of ideology’ expert, Daniel Bell, argued that ‘the goal of the new intellectual technology is, neither more nor less, to realise a social alchemist’s dream: the dream of “ordering” the mass society’. 73 Bell’s original thesis regarding the ‘end of ideology’ had presupposed a western consensus in favour of Keynesian state intervention. Like Habermas, though for different reasons, Bell was critical of technocratic social planning but nonetheless thought that computers would be increasingly used for such purposes. 74 Indeed, computers have been used to gather, process and administer information about society. They have been used for increased surveillance.

However, while their words are prescient in drawing our attention to the intersections between technology, politics, culture and the economy, today we need to go beyond Habermas, Bell, Marcuse and others, to analyse the links between technology and the justification of market, rather than Keynesian, economics. In other words, there has been a move from forms of technocratic consciousness that justified a (relatively) interventionist welfare state to forms of technocratic consciousness that justified market economics. At the same time, there has also been a resurgence of market-based legitimation. As we saw in a previous chapter, the federal government’s industrial relations legislation is largely based on claiming a fair and just exchange between directly negotiating employers and employees. As well, free markets are seen as the source of economic growth, jobs and material well-being. Once Habermas acknowledged
the decline of the Keynesian welfare state, he tended to argue that technocratic ideology had declined too. Since he conceives of technocratic consciousness predominantly in terms of state-based forms of purposive-rational action, and technocratic state economic and social planning, Habermas argued that technology no longer had a legitimating function. In his words: ‘today a continuing technocratic practice, under the banner of neo-conservative attitudes and slogans, is no longer justified with technocratic ideologies. Technology and Science, as an ideological programme, have lost much of their effectiveness.’

Yet, as the preceding analysis shows, Australian governments in fact made extensive use of technological arguments to justify their policies. It is just that now new information technology is seen as justifying state action to shore up deregulation and global markets rather than Keynesian economic planning. In other words, technological and market based legitimation have combined to be an extremely powerful ideological force. Far from undermining it, technological discourse is now frequently reinforcing market legitimation.

In order to understand the current links between market and technological discourse, we need to go beyond Habermas to look at postmodern theorists who have emphasised the way in which knowledge is itself becoming a market commodity in the context of new information technology. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard argued (with some prescience) that ‘the relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume — that is, the form of value’. He also claimed that ‘knowledge has become the principle force of production over the last few decades’.

Given this commodification, the potential for a link to be forged between new information technology and market discourse seems obvious. Not only is the knowledge spread through new information technology commodified but new information technology facilitates the global flow of finance capital and the construction of global markets. However, given his views regarding the decline of grand narratives, Lyotard does not make the links.

On the contrary, in Lyotard’s view, the growth of technology has itself contributed to the decline of grand narratives such as the market discourse of economic liberalism since ‘the decline of narrative can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means’. His views have been developed in the light of new information technologies by Mark Poster who argues that ‘the internet seems to encourage the proliferation of stories’ and ‘local narrativities without any totalizing gestures’. Like Habermas, Lyotard seems to have failed to anticipate the use of technological arguments in current political discourse. It should be noted that they are not alone. Even
some of the more detailed analyses of informational economies have missed the significance of the current intersections between new information technology, technocratic discourse and free market economics. For example, in *Economies of Signs and Space*, Lash and Urry argue that cultural domination, and symbolic violence, are no longer effected ‘through the already emptied out or abstract’ modernist ‘ideologies of liberalism, equality, progress, science and so on’ which reproduce class dominance. Rather, in the postmodern period, cultural dominance is effected via a highly specialised and autonomous media which effects symbolic violence ‘through forms which are characterized by very little meaning’. However, the forms of discourse we have been analysing here combine modernist elements of scientific progress with economic liberal market discourse and the commodification of culture.

Some later Baudrillardian accounts have treated the relationship between new information technology, culture, the economy and the market in more depth than Lyotard does. While they also provide useful insights, they have gone too far by totally collapsing the economic into the realm of the cultural rather than, as in this chapter, merely examining attempts to develop cultural sectors of a broader economy, or to commodify culture. Baudrillard originally made a strong critique of marxist theory for seeing ideology as arising from capitalist economic production and for neglecting the ways in which commodities themselves were signs. His critique has now been taken to its furthest conclusion. For, in more recent writings, capitalism itself becomes a set of hyper-real, floating, commodified meanings separated from social referents such as production. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker go even further. Using the example of the public float of *Yahoo!* (one of the favourite world wide web guides, in which share values zoomed to $1.2 billion in a single day) They argue that capitalism is now about virtual value and virtual classes, leaving consumerism, industrialism and production, far behind. Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein give other examples of virtual capitalism, including the conversion of a Japanese steelyard into a facility that produces virtual beach resorts. They go on to argue that the virtual ruling class propagates an ideology of technological fetishism and technological determinism designed to undermine state sovereignty and the welfare state in order to facilitate the free flow of information markets in virtual capitalism. Their position does acknowledge the links between technological and market legitimation that have been documented here but only in the context of ‘virtual’ capitalism. Their arguments could be seen as a more postmodern variant of Alvin Toffler’s argument that the world is shifting from power relations based on violence and wealth to ones based on knowledge.

By contrast, the analysis in this chapter suggests that new information technology is often being used as an ideological justification for privatisation, corporatisation and deregulating the labour market — all strategies that increase private profits. It is hard to see how the types of changes taking place in state
provision and at the level of production and workplace relations could be described as ‘virtual’. In short, the forms of ideology and discourse analysed in this chapter certainly involve elements of technological determinism and they do support the development of *laissez-faire* information markets. The economic is also being seen as having an increasingly ‘cultural’ component and, in turn, culture is increasingly being seen, by governments and markets alike, as a commodified resource. These developments are important ones to note. However, it would be going too far to see such discourse as justifying ‘virtual’ capitalism. On the contrary, such arguments are being used to reinforce free market relations across a range of forms of production, markets and workplaces. New information technology is only one aspect of current capitalist production. In short, one needs to combine the modernist insights from the sixties, regarding the important role of technological legitimation in government discourse and industrial capitalism with more recent postmodernist insights regarding the information economy. This is not to deny that technological legitimation may be problematic for many citizens. Where the dystopian outcome of sixties’ technological discourse may have been nuclear war, nineties’ doubts about scientific progress may involve uncertainty about the effects of globalisation as well as the fear of environmental damage associated with industrial capitalism. However, the important point for the purposes of this discussion is that discourses of technological determinism and technological legitimation are still apparent in government discourse.

One also needs to draw on a range of insights when analysing issues of identity and new information technology. Writings on cyberspace frequently draw attention to the postmodern nature of a culture where enthusiasts can play with multiple identities and shape changing (although the implications are much disputed since a number of critics have pointed out the limited effectiveness of such strategies in challenging existing social inequalities). This is not to deny that diverse marginalised groups have used the net for the purposes of information exchange and for organising. However, in computer sub-cultures as well as in some cultural theory, cyberspace is sometimes depicted as floating above older relationships of class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. At the least, new information technology is seen, as in Mark Poster’s view, to encourage forms of identity that are very different from those of modernity: ‘if modernity or the mode of production signifies patterned practices that elicit identities as autonomous and (instrumentally) rational, postmodernity or the mode of information indicates communication practices that constitute subjects as unstable, multiple, and diffuse’. There are indeed suggestions in this chapter, and in the discussion of the Keating government, that new information economies pose new challenges for traditional identity categories in government discourse. However, Poster’s view overlooks the ways, evident in Keating’s rhetoric, in which rational economic man can be reborn in diverse forms. Poster’s analysis
is even less applicable to the Howard government’s socially conservative combination of denying difference and reinstituting rational economic man while strongly supporting the development of new information technology. After all, the ability to play with multiple identities in cyberspace need not necessarily translate into a fundamental challenge to traditional political categories. On the contrary, this chapter has stressed the way in which arguments around technology have been incorporated into a range of ideological positions. Indeed, as Donna Haraway has pointed out, technoscience is itself a site of political contestation over what constitutes public space and who occupies it and the ‘reality effect’ of ‘virtual reality’ is just as real as any other form of technoscience.88

**Conclusion**

Sherry Turkle has written that ‘today the computer is an actor in a struggle between modern and postmodern understandings’.89 Turkle is partly writing about conceptions of mechanistic control versus digital simulation. However, the argument in this chapter suggests that the same could be said about the relationship between new information technology and government discourse, except that the struggle has been resolved in terms of an amalgam of the two. A modernist belief in the inevitability of technological progress and the grand narratives of economic liberalism have been combined with more postmodern conceptions of an information and cultural economy. That is why partial insights into what has been happening can be drawn from thinkers as diverse as Habermas and Lyotard. The combination of modern and postmodern elements will not necessarily surprise those theorists of postmodernity who acknowledge the continuing influence of modernism. Nor, to return to a theme raised in the first chapter, will it surprise commentators such as Beilharz, who has already drawn attention to the ways in which Australia is characterised by a combination of the modern and the postmodern.90 However, here an Australian case study seems to be drawing attention to a more general problem in analyses of technological discourse.

Changes have been taking place in Australian political culture as the relationships between the political, cultural and economic are reconstituted and fought out in government and political party discourse. The development of new information technology has played an important role in those changes but not as central as crude conceptions of technological determinism suggest. The argument in this chapter has also cautioned against overestimating the transformations involved. There has been little attempt by Australian governments to challenge the gender and other inequities already present in the design, production and usage of new technology. Nor has the nature of ideology and discourse been fundamentally transformed, rather, arguments about new
information technology have been incorporated into more traditional forms of ideology and discourse. There has been a shift from the forms of technocratic discourse analysed by theorists such as Marcuse and Habermas that were associated with forms of Keynesian government planning. Various governments have used the information revolution to justify policies of free trade and deregulation that have a long history in neo-liberalism. Nor has the cyber-age succeeded in undermining traditional identities and power relations, rather those identities and power relations have been adapted to the new conditions. For example, even the Keating government’s encouragement of cultural diversity often took market/economic reductionist forms as culture became a commodity in new information markets. An adequate analysis of what is happening needs to combine elements of more modernist analyses of technological justifications for political and economic legitimacy (such as the inevitability of technological progress) with postmodernist insights into the way in which new information technology increases the possibilities for commodification of knowledge and culture. The argument in this chapter therefore makes a case for precisely the forms of judicious theoretical eclecticism advocated in this book. It also makes a case for the need to adapt and develop existing analyses in order to explain the ways in which government discourse responds to the challenges posed at the turn of the new century.

To return to topics first raised in the introduction to this book, arguments about new information technology have also been used by governments to justify more general arguments about the need for rapid political and economic change. One needs to be deeply sceptical regarding the way in which politicians use arguments about the ‘inevitable’ implications of unprecedented social change. They are not new arguments, even if their exact content differs. Indeed, we must wait to see how long new information technology retains its privileged position. Howard has already stated his belief that ‘the first 25 years of the next century is [sic] going to see an influence of gene technology ... comparable to the influence of information technology perhaps during the last 25 years of this century. And we have to be right up there at the front.’ Above all, as Prime Minister Keating pointed out before he became convinced that his own government had fallen victim to rapid change and uncertainty: ‘I suspect politicians have been saying we are living in an era of unprecedented change since politics was born. I’m sure I remember a former prime minister of ours, Bob Menzies, saying we were living in an era of unprecedented change — and Bob was reluctant to change a light globe.’ In short, Australian political culture has been changing in the last two decades of the twentieth century but there are also important continuities as we enter the twenty-first. These issues, and their theoretical implications, will be amongst those discussed in the conclusion to this book.
Endnotes


6 See e.g. Clinton’s 1997 ‘Inauguration Address’, the White House, office of the Press Secretary, 20 January 1997; or Tony Blair’s October 1994 speech to the Labor Party Conference.


11 Bob Hawke, official opening speech, National Technology Conference, Canberra, 1983.


13 Barry Jones, ‘We’ve lost the plot for the future,’ *Australian*, 1 May 1998.


21 The Women in Science, Engineering and Technology Advisory Group (WISET), Women in Science, Engineering and Technology, discussion paper, May 1995. The advisory group was established at the behest of Chris Schacht, the then minister assisting the prime minister for science.

22 Bill Gates (with Nathan Myhrvold and Peter Rinearson), The Road Ahead, Viking Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1995, pp 258-9. Gates had just stated that ‘we have to pay particular attention to correcting the gender imbalance’ in the use of computers. An alliance between Telstra and Microsoft was intended to play a crucial role in the development of Australian online services. See Telstra press release, ‘Communications - unlocking Australia's future’, address by W Frank Blount, Telstra CEO, to the National Press Club, Canberra, 31 May 1995. Australian business commentators had earlier expressed considerable concern regarding Gates’ attempts to use Telecom to dominate the internet software market while cutting Microsoft’s distribution costs. See Sandy Plunkett, Business Review Weekly, 14 February 1994, p 54.


27 Baldwin, Beyond the Safety Net, p 56; minister for social security, Press Releases 6 April 1995 (MPS 14/95) and July 1995 (MPS 41/95).


32 Kim Beazley, address to Australia-Israel Chamber of Commerce luncheon, 21 August 1997; Australian, 17 March 1998, p 13; ALP Platform 1988, sections 4.4, 4.5, and sections 5.7 - 5.10, 5.23-5.27.


37 See for example, Kim Beazley, ‘Nation-Building: The social imperative’, address to the Australia Unlimited 1999 Conference, Melbourne, 5 May 1999.


39 John Howard, address to function for the electorate of Bass, Launceston, Tasmania, 7 October 1997, typescript, p 4.
42 Alan Ramsey, ‘If only it was so simple’, Sydney Morning Herald, 17 September 1997.
44 Howard, address, Commonwealth Business Forum, pp 4-5.
49 See further Weiss, The Myth of the Powerless State, p 11.
50 Sassen, ‘The spatial organization of information industries’, p 42.


64 *Australian Senate Hansard*, 24 March 1997, p 2340.


75 Habermas, *Habermas: Autonomy and Solidarity*, p 181.

76 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp 4-5.


83 Kroeker and Michael A Weinstein, ‘The political economy of virtual reality’.


85 One of the more detailed analyses is Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1996. For critical analyses see further Anne

86 Far be it from me as a long-term list member of ausfem-polnet to deny the efficacy of the net for sharing information and organising political activity. Nor would I underestimate the importance for marginal groups of engaging with wired culture. However, the net can, of course, be used by everyone from feminist and trade union organisations to Pauline Hanson’s One Nation and American militia groups.


91 Keating ‘Innovate Australia’, p 5.

Chapter 10

Conclusion

Modern government is more challenging than ever. There is a greater level of disenchantment with government around the world than at any stage of the history of the 20th century. And part of that is due to the fact that our lives in so many ways are changing. Our lives have changed economically. Our family lives have changed, our social life has changed, and all of us deep down want to hang on to and in some cases return to the stability that we had in the past. And I am a mixture of nostalgia and throwing forward to the future like every other person... We do live in a world environment that inflicts change on us whether we like it or not, and there is no power on earth that can stop some of that change being inflicted on us. And with the advance of information technology that is even more compelling than it’s been in the past.


Australia’s economic development is now firmly locked into the slipstream of the global economy, driven along by the new technologies changing our lives…. This economic progress is essentially a process — as Schumpeter understood it — of ‘creative destruction’, yielding huge benefits, but also imposing social costs…. We are yet to make the fundamental philosophical adjustment to an age where it is possible — perhaps for the first time in our history— for Australia to scale the heights of national prosperity while leaving large numbers of our fellow citizens behind. I argue for us to understand this challenge as creating a new mandate for government in the early 21st century — one which is fundamentally about building a knowledge-based society.


This book has concentrated on the period of the Keating and Howard governments, focusing on the challenges posed to Australian politics by the rapid social, economic and technological changes of the late twentieth century in the lead-up to the twenty-first. In particular, the book has focused on the ways government discourse interprets and frames these challenges and attempts to ‘sell’ the resulting policies to the Australian electorate.

This has been a difficult period for Australian governments. They have had to engage with forms of change at both the most global and most local of levels. As Keynesian economics came into disrepute, relationships between citizen, state and market have been reworked. Debates about globalisation have transformed conceptions of Australia’s position in the international economy and the role of the nation state’s ability to protect its citizens and industries.
Citizens are disenchanted with politicians who say there is little they can do. Meanwhile, new information technology has transformed the very conceptions of how the economic should be perceived. Colonial settler Australians have had their certainties of land ownership and control challenged by Mabo and Wik. Globalisation is aggravating the urban/rural divide. A declining relationship with Britain and Europe has seen Australia re-evaluating its relationship with Asia. Issues of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity are challenging older power relationships and conceptions of the liberal citizen. People’s most personal relationships are being challenged and transformed. In short, key social issues addressed in this book include the changing role of gender, race and ethnicity in Australian political discourse. Key economic issues include the changing relationships between state and economy in Australian political discourse associated with the development of neo-liberal ideology. Key technological issues addressed include the impact of new information technology on discourses of globalisation and new conceptions of the ‘political’, ‘economic’ and ‘cultural’ related to the development of an information economy.

The issues discussed in this book have become all the more pressing with the advent of the new century. Politicians continue to see managing change and uncertainty as a key electoral issue. During the 1998 election, Howard and Beazley both argued that Australians had a choice between two alternatives that would determine the shape of the country for not just the next century but also the next millennium. For Howard, a new tax became the unlikely panacea that would help us negotiate uncertain economic and social times, while sound economic management would help us survive the turmoil caused by globalisation and the Asian economic ‘meltdown’. Howard promised a radical economic change that would help us weather present and future economic changes. He argued that Australia had been functioning within a 1930’s tax regime and that it was time to introduce a new tax that would put Australia in a secure position for entering the twenty-first century.¹

Kim Beazley’s objections that it was a plan for a tax, not a plan for the nation, and that it was a tax based on inequity, were dismissed. The government argued that Labor politicians were poor economic managers who would not be able to lead the country into the twenty-first century or help the country to survive the ravages of the Asian economic ‘meltdown’. Labor was the party of the past, wedded to old class categories and old social divisions.² Howard claimed that Australia was a country in which people were not judged according to class, racial or ethnic background. That was the politics of the past and of a foreign past at that — Australians had succeeded in leaving behind the ‘stultifying class divisions built on tribal prejudice’ of Europe.³ Hansonism was merely the product of insecurity resulting from rapid economic change, rather than deep prejudice. Racism would be countered by offers of economic security — yet another example
of Howard’s failure to understand the politics of identity, of racism or, indeed, the negative side of the very Anglo-Celtic identity he wished to invoke.

For Howard, as we have seen with the 1999 parliamentary motion on reconciliation, the injustices which were committed against Aboriginal peoples are located firmly in the past and should never be exaggerated. Nonetheless, the Liberal government’s Wik legislation not only reflected Howard’s attacks on so-called ‘special’ Aboriginal rights but also demonstrated the extent to which Australian settler colonialism is still an on-going process. As the Mabo case and the work of Henry Reynolds (which influenced it) has shown, Australian settler colonialism was always imposed both by British colonial rule and by the actions of Australian colonial settlers themselves. Indeed Australian colonial settlers frequently went further in oppressing Aboriginal peoples, and attempting to extinguish native title rights, than either British colonial instructions, or existing law, would have deemed justified.

Keating’s native title legislation had attempted to resolve many of the legal issues which Mabo raised by facilitating some native title claims but also confirming the abolition of native title for much of Australia. When the Wik case unexpectedly opened up new doubts regarding whether native title had been legally extinguished by the actions of colonial settlers, or whether it had continued to co-exist in areas such as pastoral leases, the Howard government moved to strengthen the position of miners, developers and pastoralists in respect to indigenous Australians. In short, issues of colonial settler control of land, and Aboriginal dispossession, are still very much on the contemporary political agenda. Howard could appear more mellow in negotiations over the proposed constitutional preamble and the motion of reconciliation precisely because Aboriginal claims had already suffered a major set-back under his government. The passage of Wik was an ideal electoral outcome for Howard allowing the Coalition to reassure those ‘mainstream’ voters who endorsed conservative race politics while downplaying any racial issues in the 1998 campaign that could have maximised support for Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party.

Australia may be a ‘post’ colonial society if the ‘post’ covers all Australian history after the British colonial settlers invaded. At the theoretical level, ‘post’ can also legitimately indicate an ongoing critique of colonialism. However, Australia is certainly not ‘postcolonial’ in terms of colonialism being completed. Land ownership and control and the symbolic are still being fought out and negotiated as part of the processes of social change. So too is Australia’s relationship with Britain, as the monarchist portion of the vote in the republic referendum indicates. Indeed, the case endorsed by the majority of Coalition parliamentarians who opposed the referendum appealed to the same anti-politician sentiment that Howard had flirted with in his ‘revenge of the mainstream’ discourse — and that had facilitated the rise of Hansonism.
Nonetheless, despite its appeals to the past, for Howard, the Liberal Party is very much the party of the future. Howard is proud of what he sees as his links with the young generation, arguing that there is a natural link between the Liberal Party and young people, given their emphasis on individual choice, keeping their options open, their rejection of ideological tribalism and their realistic (i.e. lowered) expectations of what government can deliver. However, in effect, he either denies the desirability of major forms of social change or reduces them to issues of individual ‘choice’ (which government then attempts to influence). Both strategies rely on denying the legitimacy of group identity and group disadvantage and are part of his strategy for ‘governing’ social change. They form part of what Howard has increasingly characterised as the ‘Australian way’. The appeals to individual choice are meant to engender a sense of control in an uncertain world, where labour markets and patterns of full-time employment are changing only too obviously.

In short, the inevitability of some forms of change is absolutely asserted, as when it is argued that technological and global economic change demand varieties of free market economic policies. Economic change is inevitable, social change is fostered by ‘special interests’. At the same time, as the quotation at the beginning of this chapter reveals, Howard continues to acknowledge the feelings of ‘insecurity and bewilderment’ at social and economic change that affect many sections of Australian life. He offers the choice of ‘nostalgia’ for the past in some areas such as gender, race relations or the monarchy. However, in the economic area, Labor is depicted as the party that wanted to stop change, for example, by flirting with protectionism or wanting to go back to the past on industrial issues. Howard argues that Labor ‘is totally opposed to our industrial relations reform. They ... want to go back to the 1950s’. Social nostalgia is encouraged, economic nostalgia is not.

By contrast, Labor depicts itself as the caring party that will govern change by offering stability and security for those affected by globalisation. The promise of care is summed up in Beazley’s whole persona of caring avuncularism — this is the man who doesn’t mind being tagged a softie: ‘I’ll remain a big cuddly bear... My personality, insofar as it has any impact at all in terms of the voting process, produced the biggest swing to an Opposition ever in an election immediately after an election defeat.’ Beazley promises a partnership between government and the people that will offer reassurance in uncertain times. Labor is launching a claim for the Australian people ‘for jobs, for decent health care, for an education, for security and opportunity for their lives’. Nonetheless, Labor too, while claiming to have eaten ‘humble pie’ when listening to voter dissatisfaction with real wage cuts and economic rationalist policies, has also increased its emphasis on individual choice. For them, it is education that will
empower individuals since a skilled workforce will survive change more easily and attract footloose global capital. However, Beazley also acknowledges the need to look after the ‘losers’ from economic globalisation, claiming that he has never, in all his years in public life, seen ‘a greater gulf of understanding’ between those who are benefitting from economic change and those who are not.\textsuperscript{19} Beazley argues that Australia has no choice but to embrace a globalising world economy but it has to ensure that those disadvantaged by globalisation are looked after: ‘Australians don’t mind change; they don’t like unfairness’.\textsuperscript{20} In short, concern over economic inequality is re-emerging but it is conceived as a by-product of the economic change involved in globalisation rather than as a long-standing aspect of economic inequality under capitalism.\textsuperscript{21}

Currently Labor has an uneasy relationship to issues of social change, seeing them often only in terms of economic compensation for globalisation and neglecting issues of the politics of identity.\textsuperscript{22} While it does not officially denounce ‘special interests’ or other groups associated with demands for social change, neither has Labor embraced social diversity as wholeheartedly or explicitly as during the Keating period. Critics within and outside of the parliamentary Labor Party continue to criticise Keating’s relationship with ‘special interests’.\textsuperscript{23} There is no longer the glib acceptance of the melding of the social and the economic in Labor’s new politics of identity that occurred during the Keating years. Beazley’s attempts to offer security and stability have often been at the expense of embracing social change with the same enthusiasm that Keating did. Rather, Beazley’s emphasis is on ending the divisiveness of the Howard years: ‘millions in our community feel betrayed by a Government that has divided Australian against Australian, boss against worker, “haves” against “have-nots”’, a government that has wrapped ‘old prejudice in the guise of reform’.\textsuperscript{24} In short, Beazley too accuses his opponents of reverting to the class and race politics of the past. But, little is said in Beazley’s general speeches about positive support for social diversity. Labor is flirting now with an economic reductionism that doesn’t recognise social groups — as opposed to one that did. So, for example, Labor faced the 1998 election without, for the first time in years, a properly developed women’s policy.\textsuperscript{25} The difference from Labor under Keating is that this form of economic reductionism is ostensibly less dependent on the market and has a greater role for government in creating what Beazley now calls not the welfare safety net but the trampoline.\textsuperscript{26} However, unlike Howard, Beazley does not relegate injustice to Aboriginal people to the past pointing out, for example, that children were still being stolen from their families in the 1970s when both he and Howard were seeking public office.\textsuperscript{27}

Both Beazley’s and Howard’s positions demonstrate that governing change is just as much about re-governing the past as it is about governing the future. The past is reconstructed as generations who weathered the second world war, the holocaust, the great depression or the nuclear stand-off of the cold war.
discover their lifetimes being reconstructed either as ones of great stability, prosperity and suitable objects for nostalgia or as times of outdated protectionism and past injustices. Meanwhile, dystopian and utopian imaginaries are mobilised to pre-determine policy choices now, as ‘banana republics’ vie with plans for a tax rather than plans for a nation. The past, present and future are used to agitate for particular forms of governing and to provide ideological justifications for them.

The analysis in this book has suggested a number of ways in which governments have attempted to govern social and economic change. The Hawke and Keating Labor governments attempted to incorporate social changes into economic change, arguing that various social groups should work together to reconstruct Australian capitalism, making it efficient, profitable and internationally competitive for the twentieth-first century. Technological and global economic change were embraced since they were seen as offering a bright future for Australia. There may be winners and losers in the new global market but the Keating Labor government was positioning Australia to be amongst the winners. The Liberal governments have also embraced economic change as an ultimately positive force for all Australians. However, rather than incorporating social change into the economic, they have attempted to reconcile people to economic changes by assuring them that fundamental social change can be restrained or reversed. This is the politics of economic transformation and social nostalgia. The detrimental effects of globalisation are rarely mentioned, except on rural Australians. Indeed, fear of a rural electoral backlash against the combined effects of globalisation and reduced government services has even led Howard to promise more government spending on rural infrastructure — to be partly funded by the full privatisation of Telstra. Where social change has been acknowledged, as in the case of changes in women’s work, it has been transmuted into an issue of individual choice in which a benevolent government facilitates citizens’ ability to make traditional choices. Labor’s electoral defeat has led Beazley to be more circumspect about the downside of economic change — but he still sees globalisation and market reform as having great benefits. He is merely offering to assist those people who have been detrimentally affected by economic change. Focusing on governing change can mean reinforcing, or neglecting, longstanding forms of injustice and inequality.

Labor and Liberal have both attempted to draw on traditional ideological tools for managing change. John Howard has drawn on his combination of social conservatism and neo-liberal emphasis on individual choice. Labor has drawn on its long flirtation with ideologies based on social harmony and economic consensus between diverse groups — a consensus that emphasised co-operative diversity under Keating but is increasingly emphasising social cohesion under Beazley. I’ve suggested in this book that neither the Labor nor Liberal ideological traditions are particularly useful for understanding the complexities of change in the late twentieth century — not least because of their privileging of the economic.
How then do we analyse the emphasis on change and uncertainty which is present in so much Australian political discourse? Sociologists such as Giddens would argue that uncertainty is partly a consequence of self-reflexivity as traditional, fixed identities decline and individuals are increasingly creating their own identity. Giddens' analysis may well have some point in broader areas of personal life. However, if one considers government discourse, the politics of identity seem to be operating within very definite constraints. Particular fixed identities are being encouraged over others — and often those identities look like reworked, late twentieth-century variants of traditional economic liberal conceptions of the citizen-subject. Nor is the emphasis on uncertainty present in contemporary Australian political discourse merely another example of Ulrich Beck's 'risk society'. Once again, Beck's analysis may help to explain some more general anxieties and raise important issues for the twenty-first century, such as environmental ones. However, the risks and uncertainties privileged in much contemporary Australian political discourse are not the environmental and technological issues emphasised by Beck. Politicians such as Beazley are concerned about the very issues of job, welfare and income security which Beck characterises as belonging to the basic conflicts of classical industrial society rather than risk society. Nor are we facing the end of certainty as Paul Kelly suggested. Rather, we are encountering attempts to institute new certainties, new narratives, new regimes of truth.

This book has also drawn on a variety of theoretical and analytical frameworks that help to explain the ways in which current changes have been understood, and influenced by Australian political ideology and discourse. It argues that, while diverse frameworks offer useful, if partial, insights, they also tend to have a major flaw. They underestimate the extent to which government discourse, and flexible political ideologies such as liberalism, can respond to, and even incorporate, the various challenges. Many of these analyses are better at raising problems and challenges for traditional political discourse than at anticipating the actual government responses. Furthermore, Australian politics offers a particularly interesting vantage point for assessing the utility of a number of contemporary theoretical and analytical frameworks. A colonial settler society attempting reconciliation with the indigenous inhabitants; a European enclave situated adjacent to Asia and engaging with increasingly diverse forms of immigration; a former colonial economy that never industrialised fully dealing with post-industrialism and the information economy; a geographically isolated island continent — for these reasons and many more Australia is both an increasingly interesting and increasingly vexed location from which to write.

In such a context, feminist analyses, queer theory and broader theories of identity can be particularly helpful in drawing attention to the challenges which increasingly diverse and contested citizen identities pose to the 'mainstream' political subject. Meanwhile, postmodernist analyses can help us to understand
the increasing challenges to 'grand narratives' such as economic liberalism, as well as to the construction of a unified liberal subject (such as the white, male citizen). They are less helpful for understanding government attempts to incorporate these challenges within more traditional political discourse, for example, through incorporating or denying difference or adapting grand narratives to current conditions.

Foucauldian approaches have proved particularly useful for helping us to analyse the Liberal government's emphasis on individualism, and individual choice, especially the ways in which government encourages particular forms of self-managing and self-regulating behaviours by liberal citizens, while loudly asserting its opposition to state intervention. Governmentality approaches also emphasise the importance of analysing policy discourse in terms of 'practices' and 'techniques', rather than just arguments or beliefs. Where they are weakest is in helping us to analyse traditional ideological influences and forms of market discipline.

Habermasian perspectives have proved more helpful for explaining the ways in which market relations have increasingly overridden broader political and social concerns. However, analyses drawing on Habermas do not adequately address the extent to which market relations themselves are discursively constructed (rather than being forms of economic 'steering-media' which bypass rational discussion). There is therefore a need to combine aspects of Habermasian analyses with other perspectives, including Foucauldian ones, in order to understand contemporary government discourse and ideology.

Analyses of technology and cyberculture are also useful. This book has argued for combining elements of more 'modernist' analyses of technological legitimation with 'postmodernist' insights of the way in which new information technology increases the possibilities for commodification of knowledge and culture. Here, as elsewhere, drawing on a variety of theoretical approaches is the most useful approach.

Many of the theoretical viewpoints discussed in this book have suggested that more fundamental changes should have been taking place at the level of political discourse than have in fact proved to be the case. In practice, both Labor and Liberal have been attempting twentieth century solutions to the issue of social change (which often drew on much older antecedents). The traditional narratives associated with liberal ideology have proved to be very resilient. They have been adapted to late twentieth century versions of the politics of identity as the constitution of the liberal citizen has been contested and reworked. New techniques of liberal governance have gelled with older forms of economic liberalism (and economic reductionism). New technologies have added newer features to older discourses of technological determinism and free market ideology. In short, this is a period in which the political, social, economic, cultural, and the intersections between them, are being reshaped. Yet neither the Liberals nor Labor seems to be facing these challenges adequately as they attempt to
rework old solutions and old orthodoxies to incorporate change. As in so many cases discussed in this book, the past is being both contested and revisited. Indeed, that has been a central feature of governing change.

Endnotes


4 Hence the August 1999 Motion of Reconciliation’s reference to parliament’s ‘deep and sincere regret that indigenous Australians suffered injustices under the practices of past generations’.


13 John Howard, address at the close of the Liberal Party National Convention, Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, 15 March 1998.


19 Kim Beazley, ‘Nation-Building: The social imperative’, address to Australia Unlimited 1999 Conference, Melbourne, 5 May 1999. See also Kim Beazley, address to Centre for Public Policy, the University of Melbourne, 14 April 1999.

21 Beazley, ‘Nation-Building: The social imperative’.
22 Beazley, ‘Nation-Building: The social imperative’.
23 See discussion in chapter three and Martin Ferguson’s foreword and Thompson’s preface to Michael Thompson, Labor without Class, Pluto, Annandale, 1999.
27 Hansard, House of Representatives, 26 August 1999, p 7049.
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Governing Change

A crucial dilemma in current Australian politics is how to govern in a period of transformation and cultural uncertainty. *Governing Change* examines the challenges posed to government by the rapid social, economic and technological changes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Drawing on relevant aspects of contemporary social and political theory, Carol Johnson provides a detailed analysis of recent government policy. She examines how key issues are conceived and framed in Australian political discourse and how governments attempt to "sell" the resulting policy to the electorate.

Carol Johnson is a respected senior political scientist from the University of Adelaide and a former president of the Australasian Political Studies Association. She has published widely in the field of Australian political trends.

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