A TIME FOR REFLECTION
Political Values in the Age of Distraction
P J Keating
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Paul Keating uses the third Annual Manning Clark Lecture to urge Australians to remain remote from 'the gated refuge of nothingness' by restoring a proper moral basis to our politics. In the lecture he upbraids the Howard government for its exclusionary refugee policies; its blatant use of racism under the guise of freedom of speech; its assault on institutions including the High Court and the Governor Generalship; and its politicising and suborning of the public service and the Australian Defence Force. Paul Keating also disavows John Howard's 'deputy sheriff' strategy for Australia, urging an Australian, rather than American, foreign policy and with it, a new 'Australian' century.

Many of you have been attending the Weekend of Ideas, hosted over the past three days by Manning Clark House, of which this is the final session.

I am delighted to be part of it. Because out here, on the edge of Asia, a long way from major markets and natural groupings, ideas are all Australia has to shield itself from the harsh winds of global change.

Not military might, or a large population, or unique resources. Just ideas.

Ideas are what must sustain our democracy, nurture our community and drive our economy into new areas so we can cope with the challenges I will be talking about tonight.

I first met Manning Clark in the early 1980s.

I used to visit him in that little birdcage of a room on the roof of his house where he retired to think and write. That face of craggy desiccation looking out on Australia, a country which he did so much simply to interpret, but by his interpretation, to shape.

I was always amused by the view put about by some conservatives that Manning was the house historian of the Keating government. Anyone who spent time in his presence knew that he was no economic rationalist. He would have regarded financial-sector deregulation or tax reform with suspicion or indifference. And he was always much more mystical than Marxist.

But I'll come back to Manning and his contribution later.

I want to talk first about his great theme—Australia, and how we, with all our human foibles, come to terms with our lives on this continent.

After the election result was clear in 1996, I made the remark that when the government changes, the country changes.

I was making the unfashionable point that politics matter: that by their actions and words, our political leaders powerfully shape the sort of country Australia is.

I was saying that whatever voters might have been entitled to draw from the bland me-tooism of Liberal-policy pronouncements during that election campaign, Australia would be different afterwards.

And, six years on, it is more different than even I imagined.

The last time I spoke here at the National Library was in August 1993 at its twenty-fifth-anniversary dinner. I said then, partly by way of tribute to Sir John Gorton who had opened the Library, that I believed that change—some of which the Gorton government had set in motion—had 'won a resounding victory' in Australia.

I said: 'We have seen the remarkable growth of tolerant, creative cultural pluralism and all the riches this has brought Australia . . . the xenophobia has largely gone.'

Well, over the past five or six years there is no doubt that the reactionaries have fought back. The tolerance looks frailer and the xenophobia more robust.

From those first claims in the 1996 election that our national objective should be to become 'relaxed and comfortable' to the fear-mongering about borders in the 2001 campaign, this government has consistently looked both inward and backward.

The last campaign was fought overtly about closing the borders and keeping people out, but symbolically that idea has been the sustaining policy theme of the Howard years.

They have been trying to pull up the drawbridge, but they have failed to understand that moats cannot keep us safe anymore.

The period of reaction began with the flirtation with Hansonism and the pretence that the blatant racism was really all to do with freedom of speech.

We have seen, ever since, from the government and its coterie of columnists, the repetitive use of demonising language: 'the Aboriginal industry', 'welfare rorters', 'queue jumpers', 'political correctness', 'elites' and 'chattering classes'.

The emphasis is exclusionary. It's an effort in part to stigmatise those who are destitute or stateless as having somehow brought it upon themselves. The approach is a manifestation of the growing tendency of contented bourgeois societies all over the world to express their extremism around matters of inclusion and especially citizenship. Who is in and who is out. Who belongs to our community and who doesn't.

Much cleverer people than Pauline Hanson have since joined the game in Australia. People with fewer excuses than small shopkeepers in troubled regional towns.

For example, Professor Wolfgang Kasper told the readers of Quadrant a couple of months ago—Quadrant readers may be few in number, but they do know what they like—that Muslim immigrants to Australia brought unacceptably high 'transaction costs'. They are not People Like Us.

He was echoed in the press not long later by John Stone.

This was the central message behind that infamous advertisement during the last election campaign: 'We have the right to decide who comes to this country'.

Once the language has been debased and the people marginalised, it is much easier to convince voters that asylum-seekers are prepared to sacrifice their children or are terrorists. That it is acceptable in Australia for children to be locked away, out of sight, in desert camps and treated like prisoners.

The numbing effect of this is that we are at risk of becoming, as Manning once said, subjects in the kingdom of nothingness. Subjects of a post-Christian, post-Enlightenment world where there is no inspiration, no higher endeavour, little compassion and no belief beyond narrow self-interest. Like members of a gated community we pretend, in our comfortable urban solace, that all is well, including all around us.

Manning used to say that Australian public life broke into two groups: the enlargers, and the punishers and straighteners.

As the incarcerated asylum-seekers at Woomera can attest, this government is well and truly into the punishing and straightening game.

There has long been an inbuilt tension in Australian approaches to immigration; between the idea that our immigration policy is basically about patrolling our perimeter to keep people out and the reality that we need to attract good immigrants to help us develop the country, people who are doing us a service into the bargain.

It's the latter view that has to prevail. Televised pictures of asylum-seekers in camps and news reports of our treatment of refugees are doing us far more damage in terms of the message they send to skilled young people the world over than whatever spurious deterrent benefits they may be thought to have against so-called 'queue jumpers' or illegal immigrants. The notion that Australia is suspicious of foreigners is a damaging idea to put out in a world that is becoming smaller and more interdependent.

In few areas of policy has the change in Australia's view of itself been clearer than in the attitude the country brings to foreign policy generally and to Asia in particular.

Members of this government claimed that as Prime Minister, I was pursuing an Asia-only policy. Of course that was never true. We had a more effective relationship with

the United States than the current Coalition has and a position with European governments of real standing.

But we did believe that all Australia's vital interests coalesced in Asia. That Australia needed to find its security in Asia, not from Asia. But it was always Australian interests we were talking about, not Asian ones.

The Howard government came to office proclaiming—more code— that Australia did not have to choose between its geography and its history. As though you can ever choose between those two fixed realities.

The only thing we can choose is our future, and this is where the country has been let down.

The current government brings to its relations with Asia a policy only of benign neglect and tokenism. They believed they could send one message to the outside world and another to the domestic audience. But in the information age, you can't get away with this duplicity.

From the time Gough Whitlam got the fire hose out to clean the postcolonial sludge from Australian foreign policy, an essential bipartisanship obtained in Australia about our view of the world.

The political parties might differ on ways and means of getting there, or about the handling of particular issues, but the direction we were headed in, the nature of Australian interests in the world, were agreed.

That bipartisanship fell apart with John Howard. The Howard government has subordinated foreign policy to domestic policy to an unprecedented and dangerous degree.

We've seen it in the jingoism after the Timor intervention, in the withdrawal from UN committees which had the temerity to criticise government policy. And it had its most recent manifestation in the Tampa and the 'Pacific Solution'—and isn't that phrase a good example of the capacity of this government to get political double-speak accepted in public discourse.

It was on view again in interesting ways during John Howard's latest visit to Jakarta. The visit where journalists in the press party were told it was all a success, while officials were insulting President Megawati and telling favourite journalists that the Prime Minister would probably never return there. One of the themes of press briefings during the visit—at least those that did not consist of gratuitous off-the-record insults to Indonesia and its leaders—was criticism of my alleged obsession with Indonesia.

The only obsession has been their obsession with me.

I believe the government's problems with foreign policy stem from its own insecurity; from a defensive and uncertain view of Australia and its place in the world. A sense

that we should know our place, that we shouldn't get ideas above our station. A government that has little faith in Australians or what they are capable of.

We saw it clearly in John Howard's agreement to the assertion that Australia's role in the region was to be the Deputy Sheriff.

The Deputy Sheriff!

I'd have more respect for him if he'd wanted to pin the silver star on his own lapel and gallop off at the head of the posse. But that is not where Australia goes under the Howard regime.

The changes in Australia since 1996 have not just been in ways of thinking. Australia's institutions have also been eroded in dangerous ways.

There is something odd about Australian conservatives. It is that, in some important ways, they aren't conservatives at all.

Whatever else you say about conservative political philosophies, you can usually rely upon their followers to cherish institutions of state. It's true of the different brands of conservatism in Britain and the United States. Whether it's the American constitution or the British House of Lords, they want to keep and preserve them, to defend them from enemies and often from friends as well.

Out here, though, we've ended up with conservatives who treat the institutions of state with contempt.

From the High Court to the Australian public service to the Australian Defence Force to the nature of the Governor Generalship, the Howard government has been damaging those institutions rather than preserving them. Undermining them, not defending them.

The Coalition has a contemptuous disregard for convention—the etiquette—that has grown around us and which provides the binding for our social and political life.

Political parties and leaders are in most respects the custodians of these mores. Wise governments not only guard that which we all cherish, they try to polish and hone things into the bargain. This notion, the current government regards as old hat.

John Howard is no respecter of conventions. He was not a principal player in 1975 in the Senate's outrageous conduct, but he did not demur either.

And now, as Prime Minister, he can effect a much more certain influence in matters, he disregards convention to the service of his political convenience.

Let me begin with the Governor General. I said at the time of Dr Hollingworth's appointment that it was in my view an error of judgement to appoint a churchman to the position. I made the point that had I sought to appoint someone like the former and now retired Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Cardinal Clancy, there would have been an outcry from Howard and the conservatives.

Apart from the issue of principle at stake in mixing church and state, John Howard knows as well as anyone in contemporary politics that it is really only since the end of the 1970s that we have buried sectarianism in this country in any substantial way.

In my lifetime I saw advertisements in the *Sydney Morning Herald* saying 'Catholics need not apply'. We are blessed to be rid of this stuff. All of us. Why would you take a chance on any of it rearing its ugly head, given that these days there are a lot of ugly heads around? Nevertheless, John Howard was prepared to give the cage a rattle.

As far as Dr Hollingworth himself goes, history is perhaps going to be the more important judge of his tenure. But without waiting for the history I think we can say with full confidence that apart from the initial error of judgement in seeking to appoint a churchman to this position, John Howard did not even adequately determine, as he should have, personally, the suitability of Dr Hollingworth for the job.

Dr Hollingworth is not just a victim of his own circumstances, he is a victim of John Howard's judgement.

A Prime Minister must approach major appointments with conscientiousness and much forethought and take responsibility for his decisions.

But the appointment of the Governor General is not where the government's disregard for institutions ends.

We have witnessed the scandalous attacks on the High Court over the Wik judgement. These people say they believe in the rule of law, except the laws they do not like.

And that 'good fellow' Tim Fischer, was not so good a fellow when he was attacking the High Court and the Chief Justice for all he was worth.

Contrast that with the Labor government, which was thrown one of the greatest curve balls in constitutional history when the High Court declared that native title emanated from the common law of Australia but gave no indication of what it was, who had it or how it could be obtained.

But, unlike this government, the Labor government celebrated the essential justice of the Court's judgement and did everything to make the decision work. It didn't leave the Court out in the cold, out on a limb. It devoted two years to building, from the ground up, a massive piece of property and cultural law.

Canberra, above all other cities, understands the wider meaning of the shocking revelations we have heard about the institutional and, in some cases, personal behaviour of the public service and the ADF during the boat-people scandal. And I don't choose the word 'shocking' lightly.

We have seen how far the Australian public service has been cowed. It has been politicised well beyond any point we have known in the past.

I worked for over thirteen years as a Minister and as Prime Minister with men and women in the public service. I liked and admired Australian officials. I admired the integrity of their efforts. Most of what we accomplished in those years could not have been done without their skills and commitment. They served the government loyally but understood that the highest manifestation of that loyalty was their ability to advise fearlessly without recrimination or rebuke.

Michael Keating, for example, or Mike Codd before him, or Chris Higgins, or Bernie Fraser, never did, and never would have, regarded themselves as political strategists for the Prime Minister or the Treasurer. They would not have seen their role as preserving the impression of ignorance among Ministers about a matter at the centre of an election campaign simply because the truth might be politically inconvenient.

The government is to blame for the shameless politicisation of the public service. It fired off the warning shots within days of coming to office with the unprecedented dismissal of six departmental secretaries. It changed the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet into a de facto extension of the Prime Minister's political office.

And the government is to blame for the way it has used the armed forces for flag-waving political purposes and seduced senior officers into political service, thereby creating a dangerous void around the ADF.

But the blame does not end with the government and its appointees. It also rests with individual public servants and military officers who did not do their duty in a period of political tension or who found it convenient not to enquire too much.

It is impossible to imagine any reviews of public-service standards and performance being generated from within the government or from central public-service institutions. Such reviews will have to come from self-reflection within the service, from parliamentary oversight and from public and media discussion. And it is essential that that happens.

But the attack on institutions and our conventions is even wider than that.

We have seen a Chairman of the national broadcaster introduce the Head of Government to a political fundraiser.

A Chairman of the Broadcasting Authority campaign with the Prime Minister in an emotive referendum and attack his newspaper critics in public speeches. The same Chairman who is in the press defending the current Governor General in the matters of controversy surrounding him.

The concept that a statutory officeholder owes allegiance to the country and not just the government that appointed him is regarded as simply irrelevant and old-fashioned.

It is not proper and it is not right, but to this government everything is to be chewed up in its determination to win at all costs.

The government lied its way through an election campaign about a matter of central consequence and then sought to stonewall its way out of it. And when Admiral Barrie, the Chief of the Defence Force, finally 'fessed up', the Prime Minister, brazen as brass, said Admiral Barrie enjoyed his full confidence even though Barrie's admission destroyed the integrity of a central factor in the Prime Minister's election campaign.

The Howard government reserves the right to make a hero of a general when it suits them and a fool of an admiral when it suits them. And pawns of the whole Defence Force whenever it fits their convenience.

John Howard does not understand that the moral basis of our politics has to be protected and nurtured. The moral gutting in the way our affairs have been recently run will exact costs down through history. Governments have to be wise enough and decent enough to know that such fraying is hard to stabilise once started, and that such opportunism must be desisted with.

I want to turn now to the reason all this matters. I think the world is changing in ways which will make Australia's environment more dangerous and difficult.

At the end of the Cold War, we found ourselves without a guiding light. We saw the aggregation of great wealth to the liberal capitalist economies and, with it, triumphalism and smugness at their centre.

We let go the remarkable opportunity we had then to remake the institutions of power in the world so they were more representative, to run the international system more cooperatively, to do something about actually getting rid of the world's 31,000 nuclear weapons. It wasn't that these things were too hard, it is that they weren't attempted.

Michael Ignatieff described the post-Cold War period recently as 'a general failure of the historical imagination, an inability to grasp that the emerging crisis of state order in so many overlapping zones of the world would eventually become a security threat', a threat to the contented established order, even to a superpower.

Then came the terrorist attacks of September 11.

I don't believe, as some commentators have claimed, that the world was changed utterly by the terrible events on September 11. On the contrary, I think we got to understand the world better.

It was a reminder to us of JK Galbraith's remarks that the tribulations at the margin of society would eventually upset the contentment at its centre. September 11 made his point compellingly. There were few more contented places than Wall Street.

However, the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon did profoundly change one very important thing. They gave Americans a new sense of their own vulnerability.

I believe many aspects of the responses to the terrorist attacks were completely necessary. Rigorous efforts to track down the perpetrators of the attacks and those who directed or helped them had to be made.

And I agree with the action taken to prevent such attacks happening in future, including the sort of intervention we saw in Afghanistan.

But I am worried about wider aspects of the United States' response to the September 11 attacks.

Far from tempering the unilateralist instincts of the Bush Administration, the attacks seem to have fuelled them.

The Administration insists that other countries are 'either with us or against us'—and that being 'with us' means saluting smartly whenever the current policy response is announced.

The US conjures up a non-existent 'axis of evil' and demands action to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It's a worthy aim but it ignores the fact that non-proliferation requires de-proliferation.

Yet the Bush Administration has refused to participate in talks on the implementation of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and has announced its withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.

Instead, it will spend billions of dollars on a Missile Defence System that will not do the job it is intended for, but will make the global strategic environment even more dangerous.

All of this works now because of the overwhelming dominance of United States power and its capacity to act on its own in the world at remarkably little risk to its men or its treasure.

But American unilateralism is simply not a sustainable leadership model for the world.

The developed world cannot just take the economic benefits of globalisation—the trade and investment—and ignore the demands from other parts of the globe for a voice and for representation. Such action will simply store up fiery resentment which will eventually manifest itself in ever more dangerous ways.

Australia cannot ignore these dangers.

This is the only nation in the world with a continent of its own. But there are only twenty million of us. Around one-third of the population on the little island of Britain.

Australia will never have the benefit of the unearned weight of size. Unlike China or the United States or India or the EU or Indonesia, we don't have the clout that comes from having a large mass of people.

Australia's national image of itself, and our view of where we are entitled to sit in the international pecking order, was largely set in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a time when a combination of British imperial power and the Industrial Revolution gave us a privileged international position as commodity producers with secure markets. That world has gone forever.

The way we can best leverage our influence in the world now is through good ideas and the powers of persuasion. And especially and importantly, by remaining good international citizens.

The US Congress cannot make Australian foreign policy, and we would be foolish to want it to. If we are to get this part of an enlarging vision right, we have to stop thinking of ourselves as the 'Orphan in the Pacific', as David Malouf memorably put it, and find ourselves at home here.

I made the point last year at the Labor Party's centenary dinner that the First and Second World Wars meant that for much of the twentieth century, Australia had a British century. I hoped that the twenty-first century would be an Australian century. But John Howard and his conservative supporters are determined to make it an American century by virtually surrendering any real strategic policy independence to the United States and doing it unthinkingly. Surely our sense of nation demands that we have our own role in world affairs, and not allow ourselves to be cast as an extra in the stage play of American unilateralism.

To keep the best notions of Australia bubbling within itself, to keep us from that gated refuge of nothingness, the more we remain members of the great project of humanity the better off we will be, and the happier we will be.

The more we resist arbitrary and parochial distinctions between peoples, the more our security in this great part of the world will be guaranteed and the more our participation in it will be rewarded.

Ours is an age of distraction. The background to our lives is the white noise of inconsequential television programs, pompous pundits, shrill talkback callers, ten-second news grabs, and the cult of celebrity.

In this environment, the need for contemplation and some introspection becomes compelling; a time to stop and think, to make our way, guided by a moral compass, a bearing that divines our best instincts.

Manning understood this. He taught us that the way people think of themselves in the cosmos will affect the way they behave in the physical framework of their lives.

In that last speech I made at the National Library in 1993 I also spoke about Manning. I said that, 'More than any other Australian writer, he elevated Australian history to the point where all of us could say that the story of Australia was part of the universal story—uniquely Australian, but at every stage connected to the world beyond.'

How right Manning has been.

And how vital it is that we understand the importance of that connection now.