THE LAUNCH OF CHURCHILL AND AUSTRALIA
P J Keating
Sydney
30 October 2008

Graham Freudenberg invited Paul Keating to launch his *Churchill and Australia* as they both recognised Churchill's unique relevance to Australia. Paul Keating had often said that regard for Churchill and his life was the main reason he himself had taken on a political vocation. Both men are taken with Churchill's moral clarity and principally his 'rejection of the devil's bargain (with Hitler).'

Graham has done me the honour of asking me to launch his book, *Churchill and Australia*, a request he made of me about a year ago.

He has produced a marvellous and important work about the person who, more than any other world leader, was central to Australian fortunes in two world wars: Winston Churchill.

The book, as we might expect, is extensively researched and beautifully written, though its innate beauty arises more from its honest quest for truth than necessarily its prose.

John Lukacs, the American historian, wrote that 'there can be no good history that is not told or written well'.

Graham's Churchill and Australia qualifies in both respects.

Graham's storylines are long and colourful and crocheted as simply or as complexly as the events they are describing demand. It is enjoyable to see a political storyteller turn his hand, so confidently and so persuasively, to so specialised and yet so grand a narrative.

From the period of our Federation through the following half-century, Britain was the country with which we were most engaged and its empire was the structure on we which we so fervently relied and rejoiced at inclusion in.

We did not know and could not have known that the Edwardian period was to be the zenith of Britain's long international history and that the First World War effectively ended its primacy in the world. Nor could we have known that the seeds of the Second World War had been sown in the settlement of the first and that the second conflagration would involve us as comprehensively as had the first. And that one person, above all others, would be common to the events of both epochs and to the fortunes of Australia and Australians. That person, of course, the subject of Graham's book, Winston Churchill.

Graham pretty well sums up Churchill and his view of Australia at the opening of his book, in its prologue, and at its closing, at its last page. In the prologue he says:

Churchill's involvement with Australia, unparalleled by any other British leader, covered and influenced every stage of our transition from a dependent colony of the British Empire to a dependent ally of the United States. From beginning to end his primary interest in Australia lay in its capacity to contribute to Britain's military strength, on which he believed everything else depended.

And at the last page Graham writes:

Incomparably, Winston Churchill thought more about Australia and more about what Australia thought of him than any world leader before or since, or ever will again.

Churchill had spoken of his 'solemn responsibility to the Australian people'. Graham asks 'which foreign president or prime minister will ever write 'my solemn responsibility to the Australian people', with half so good a will as Churchill did?' And he goes on to say that in the disputes with Curtin in 1942 'the essential difference between Churchill and Roosevelt was that Churchill genuinely believed that Australian interests, however waywardly he interpreted them, counted for something in the common cause [whereas] Roosevelt did not'.

Graham approvingly quotes Menzies as saying 'as for all of Churchill's ambivalence and contradictions, none was as great and powerful a friend as he was'. To which Graham adds 'we shall not look upon his like again'.

These are not the words or the sentiment of a snarling nationalist, unable or unwilling to recognise the integrity of a man set against the backdrop of his own times and history.

To say that Graham Freudenberg has been fair to Churchill in this analysis of his relationship with Australia would be to way understate the decency and objectivity with which he has treated him.

Graham's motivation for his early and express invitation to me to launch this important work only became apparent to me as I started to read my way through his book. I think he wanted me to know that, even through the prism of Australia, his ambivalence towards Churchill did not blind him to Churchill's greatness. The same view that I have long held about Churchill myself.

I have said on many occasions, unlikely as it might be for a Labor person to say, that the inspiration for my entry into public life, and into the Labor Party itself, came from Churchill. Nominally, a classic Edwardian and a British conservative. But as we know, more than that.

I was attracted to him for his braveness, sense of adventure, compulsion and moral clarity. That at the most important moment of his political life and probably in Britain's history, upon assuming the prime ministership, he was being prevailed upon by his Conservative Party benefactors to trade with Hitler. More than that, to keep the prime

ministership, he would be expected to trade with Hitler. And his resounding ‘no’ to that demand turned out to be the fatal spike in Hitler’s scheme of tyranny, leading, as it did, to the salvation of Western Europe.

As Graham says, ‘Churchill’s rejection of this devil’s bargain is his eternal greatness’. He makes the point, correctly, that ‘Hitler wanted to recruit the British Empire as an accomplice in his criminality on a world-wide scale.’

A lesser political figure would have gone along with his party and the establishment he belonged to. Hitler had held out the prospect of Britain retaining sovereignty over its islands and its empire, without military conflict, an outcome appealing to Britain’s upper class, including, as we now know, the then Queen.

As Graham notes, Churchill’s strategy never varied. It was, that if Britain held control of its island, that if the moat of the English Channel and the North Sea could be reinforced and maintained, then Hitler could never win his war. And that the principal role of Australia in that strategy was to militarily reinforce Britain.

If any one of us were to occupy the prime ministership of Britain in May 1940, with the British Army holed up in Calais and Dunkirk waiting upon Hitler’s death blow, with France capitulating and the Dutch queen seeking refuge in London, would it be unreasonable to worry about reinforcements?

By that stage, of course, the matter had became tribal, leaving scant place in Churchill’s mind for niceties as to the views of the so-called dominions. We should remember this was more than two years before Japan showed its hand in the Pacific.

For all that, the two most obvious Australian strikes against Churchill remain Gallipoli and his 1942 disagreement with Curtin as to the defence of Australia. To that we may add his promise of protection by strength of the fortress of Singapore.

Graham writes that ‘No event in Australian history is more closely associated with Churchill, with praise or blame, than the Gallipoli campaign of 1915’.

On all the evidence since, I think it is reasonable to say that Churchill did overcook the arguments in favour of a naval and infantry campaign against Turkey in the Dardanelles Strait, with the object of control of Constantinople, the modern Istanbul. It is even worth arguing, as Graham argues, that Churchill drove the Turks into the arms of the Germans when he requisitioned and seized control of the two dreadnought battleships which the Turks had ordered from British yards and had already paid for.

Indeed, it may even have been that a phalanx of British battleships both old and new was unable to take out the Turkish forts. It was certainly true that control of the Gallipoli peninsula was not capable of realisation without infantry and that the Turks had been put on red alert when Britain had earlier tried to mine the mouth of the Dardanelles.

But Graham makes this powerful point:

Asquith was the cleverest British Prime Minister of the twentieth century. Kitchener was hailed as the greatest British soldier since the Duke of Wellington, and Lord Fisher the greatest British seaman since Lord Nelson. Churchill became the greatest wartime Prime Minister in British history. Between them, they produced Gallipoli.

They did produce Gallipoli. But with the Western Front in a quagmire and standstill and given Australian loyalties to 'King and country', it was entirely explicable that we would be there to help, including at Gallipoli.

So our motivations were, as Graham notes, divided by nationalism and imperialism; between loyalties to the empire and a desire for a more independent Australia. Importantly, he suggests that 'Churchill's ambivalence about Australia was a mirror image of Australia's ambivalence about itself'.

On the one hand we were out to prove that 'the British race in the antipodes had not degenerated' yet we resented being dragooned into a war which did not threaten our own country or its people.

As Graham says, 'In an almost theological sense, Australian Britons had been born again into the baptism of fire at Anzac Cove', questioning, somewhat tongue in cheek, whether we needed being reborn at all.

The 'reborn' part went to a lack of confidence and ambivalence about ourselves. Who we were and what we had become. If our sons suffered and died valiantly in a European war, such sacrifice was testament to the nation's self-worth.

In some respects we are still at it—not at the suffering and the dying—but still turning up at Gallipoli, the place where Australia was needily redeemed.

The truth is that Gallipoli was shocking for us. Dragged into service by the imperial government in an ill conceived and poorly executed campaign, we were cut to ribbons and dispatched.

And none of it in the defence of Australia. Without seeking to simplify the then bonds of empire and the implicit sense of obligation, or to diminish the bravery of our own men, we still go on as though the nation was born again or, even, was redeemed there. An utter and complete nonsense.

For these reasons I have never been to Gallipoli and I never will.

One of the most powerful parts of the book goes to what Graham calls Churchill's overheated reaction to Curtin's 'looking to America' message of January 1942. Graham contends that this episode distorted Churchill's relationship with Australia for the rest of the war and beyond. He says 'the root of the trouble lay in an irreconcilable outlook'; namely, 'Curtin could never accept that Australia's fate must be completely subordinated to Churchill's grand strategy'. And that he stung Churchill by saying 'we know that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on'. Graham writes that the sting came from the fact that Churchill knew in his heart that 'not only was this true, but that his own policy had made it true'.

In his Second World War history, Churchill wrote that the Australian government had a duty to ‘study their own position with concentrated attention’ but, he said, ‘we had to try to think for all’ while ‘observing a true sense of proportion in world strategy’. In other words, the grand strategy warranted primacy, notwithstanding the seriousness of the parochial peril.

On 26 January 1942, in a public address on Australia Day, Graham records that Curtin said, among other things, that ‘no single nation can afford to risk its future on the infallibility of one man and no nation can afford to submerge its right to speak for itself because of the perceived omniscience of another’. There were no marks for guessing who the one man was.

But what really got Churchill’s goat was Curtin writing to him about arrangements being worked out between Roosevelt and Churchill and their military chiefs. Curtin told Churchill that Australia had been left in the cold and that ‘our chiefs of staff are unable to see anything in these proposals except the endangering of our safety’.

Curtin communicated to Roosevelt, as Graham records, three seminal paragraphs which changed the course of Australian foreign policy.

Without inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.

We know the problems that the United Kingdom faces. We know the constant threat of invasion. We know the dangers of dispersal of strength, but we know, too, that Australia can go and Britain can still hold on.

We are, therefore, determined that Australia shall not go and we shall exert all our energies towards shaping of a plan, with the United States as its keystone, which will give our country some confidence of being able to hold out until the tide of battle swings against the enemy.

Graham wrote that, ‘The Greatest Living Englishman left no doubt about his own thinking: “I hope there will be no pandering to this,” he cabled Attlee, “while at the same time we do all in human power to come to their aid.” To Lord Cranborne, he categorised the article as “misbehaviour”. He claimed in his memoirs that Curtin’s article had been “flaunted round the world by our enemies”’.

Graham’s extract on this episode is probably the best of any in the book. He writes:

Curtin’s offence was compounded by its timing. Churchill saw it as an impertinent intervention by a colonial politician who did not truly represent his own country. In his eyes, everything was wrong about the message: a gift to German and Japanese propaganda; a challenge to his political position in Britain; yet another Australian attempt to seat itself in the British War Cabinet and now a bid for the Anglo-American high table; an unwarranted assertion of Australian independence; a weakening of the unity of the Empire; an ill-timed exposure of the bankruptcy of three decades of British Far Eastern strategy; an affront to his honour as the man who had given his pledged word about the rescue of the kith and kin; an insult to the efforts that even

now he was making on their behalf; a competitive bid for American aid; a threat to the ‘beat Hitler first’ strategy; and an infringement of his monopoly with Roosevelt as the voice of the Empire.

For all of Churchill’s undertakings, Curtin knew the Singapore guarantees, though conscientiously given and solemnly meant, were either unenforceable or rapidly becoming unenforceable.

Over Christmas 1941, he made the historic turn to the United States, forsaking the covenants of Empire. For the first time, he lifted Australia’s interests beyond the general, to their appropriate point of primacy.

A history of these subjects and of this kind needed to be written. Of its essence, Graham Freudenberg’s book is a history of Australia’s relationship with Britain during the Imperial period.

In some ways, Graham has employed Churchill as a prop to tell a wider story of the two nations.

But Australia’s relationship with Winston Churchill, for good or for ill, is one of the defining aspects of Australian history, especially as it related to our involvement in the two world wars.

The Imperial period, covering the first half of the twentieth century was the time when what happened in the British Foreign and Dominions office set the scene for policy in Australia. Those days are now well over.

These days Australia makes its own foreign policy. No longer do we subscribe to the Richard Casey view that ‘the foreign policy of Great Britain is the foreign policy of Australia’.

The key point being that it is incumbent upon us to construct a foreign policy in our own interests. And just as the twentieth century was the British century for Australia, we should not allow the twenty-first century to be our American century, notwithstanding the flying start John Howard made for us in respect of the latter.

People may say, well, of course that is now the case. Yet Graham makes a telling point in the book, indeed an exceptional one, when he reminds us that Australia declared war on Japan before Britain declared war on Japan. Where before, according to form, we would have otherwise tagged along. And, as it turned out, upon that declaration, Prime Minister Curtin wrote to the King instructing him that his Australian ministers had declared war on Japan and that acting on the advice of his ministers, the King was also at war with Japan. That was, the King of Great Britain, George VI.

This would be akin to the Australian government of today declaring war on another state and advising the Queen of Australia, also the Queen of Great Britain, that she, too, on the advice of her ministers, was at war with that country. Underlining again, if it needs underlining, that the earlier our head of state has interests entirely

coincident with our own, the better it will be for us and Queen Elizabeth II, her heirs and successors.

Churchill was, as the historian John Lukacs said, ‘uncharacterisable’. He said most of the political establishment distrusted him because he was the kind of person whom mediocrities instinctively fear.

A biographer, Roy Jenkins, wrote that Churchill’s aristocratic background never governed his career. ‘Churchill was too many-faceted, idiosyncratic and unpredictable a character to allow himself to be imprisoned by the circumstances of his birth.’ In an entirely different setting, I should say ‘hear, hear’ to that.

But there is another side to Churchill, an important one worth making reference to: his magnanimity.

Churchill could be overbearing, truculent and even petty but never mean. That good mind was also a fair one.

His fight with Curtin was about his management of the war and his priorities; it was in no way about punishing or ostracising Australia.

Indeed, immediately after the war he was advocating the cause of a united Germany. In 1946 he was promoting reconciliation between France and Germany. In the same year at Fulton in Missouri he was decrying the division and the isolation of the East European states.

In the early 1950s, as the Cold War got going in earnest, he was arguing a place for the Soviet Union in the new world order, including a place for it in Europe.

In 1948, in a famous speech given at The Hague, he advocated a European Union Congress to provide political and functional unity to Europe.

He could have been excused for thinking that after six years of punishing conflict with Germany and Britain’s chance victory, that he should have been all defensive and recriminatory. But not him. His magnanimity and judgement frogmarched him on to even more expansive campaigns.

As Graham says, we shall not look upon the likes of him again.

Principally, he had the temperament of an artist, from which sprang his boundless imagination.

Leadership, after all, is as I have so often remarked, about two things: imagination and courage. The imagination to see the bigger picture, to make sense of it and to imagine something better; and having the courage to see the changes through. Churchill had these qualities in spades.

As he said, as a young minister, to Asquith’s daughter, Violet Bonham Carter, musing over things after a dinner, ‘you know Violet, in the end, we are all worms, but

I do believe I am a glow worm'. He was a glow worm and he lit up the most miserable epoch of the miserable twentieth century like no one before or after him.

I congratulate Graham on his book, for undertaking such a huge task, 600 pages, and for fulfilling it with such commitment and élan.

Let me also thank the publisher, Macmillan, for encouraging and publishing such an important work.

It is my very great honour to launch *Churchill and Australia*.