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In 1890, the Australian colonial politician, Henry Parkes, referred to the 'crimson thread of kinship' which he believed bound Australians to the United Kingdom. Within an increasingly multicultural Australia, situated within the Asia-Pacific region, such ties to the United Kingdom might be thought an anachronistic aspect of Australia’s past. Yet in the 1990s and 2000s, two Australian Prime Ministers, who shared sixteen years of office between them, placed Australia’s relationship to the United Kingdom at the centre of their respective political agendas, and at the core of their engagement with each other. This article seeks to investigate why this aspect of Australia’s past took on such a contemporary importance during the Prime Ministerships of Paul Keating and John Howard, and focuses on the discursive strategies each Prime Minister adopted to render the ‘crimson thread’ such a salient feature of the Australian political landscape.

It was N.S.W. Premier, Henry Parkes, who referred to the ‘crimson thread of kinship’ linking Australians to the United Kingdom (Samuels 2014). He did so at a dinner for the Federation Conference in Melbourne in 1890, an event which marked the process which would eventually culminate in the founding of the Commonwealth of Australia, at Sydney’s Centennial Park, on January 1, 1901.

This article focuses on two Australian Prime Ministers who, in their political contestation with each other, placed Australia’s historical, constitutional and emotional links to the United Kingdom at the center of the Australian political agenda. Paul Keating, as leader of the federal parliamentary Labor Party, and John Howard, as leader of the federal parliamentary Liberal Party, shared sixteen years of the Australian Prime Ministership between them (1991-2007). During those years, Australia underwent profound economic, social and cultural change, in the wake of which we still live today. Each of these Prime Ministers was a pivotal figure in this transition to an increasingly globalized world, with all the transformations this imposed on the Australian economy and society (see Megalogenis 2006; Kelly 2009). But each also considered Australia’s relationship to the United Kingdom as being of fundamental importance to this process of transition.
It is this latter consideration which is the focus of the article. Although Howard and Keating considered this relationship to the United Kingdom to be of fundamental political importance to Australia, they did so in very different, indeed contrasting ways. Whereas Howard believed that the affirmation of Australia’s links with the United Kingdom was a vital aspect of Australia’s constitutional and national identity, and in no way inconsistent with the imperatives that Keating, as Prime Minister, sought to achieve, Keating believed that these links were a profound impediment to these imperatives, and therefore a residual element of Australian history that needed to be explicitly repudiated if Australia was to become an integral part of the Asian region and the globalized world.

This article begins by considering the personal backgrounds of Howard and Keating, and argues that these backgrounds provide some explanation as to why each placed such different interpretations on Australia’s links to the United Kingdom. It then considers Keating’s Prime Ministership and how he placed these links at the centre of a much wider political agenda – what he called his ‘Big Picture’ – in terms of which he sought to renegotiate Australia’s relationship with the Asian region and an increasingly globalised world. The ‘Big Picture’ involved four major policy themes – reconciliation with Australia’s indigenous people, republicanism, multiculturalism and increasing engagement with the Asian region. Keating saw Australia’s U.K. legacy as relevant to each of these, in the sense that it was a legacy that needed to be explicitly repudiated if each was to be achieved.

The article then considers Howard’s reaction to each of these elements of Keating’s ‘Big Picture’. Not least, it considers the way Howard sought to present each as a divisive, exaggerated or unnecessary response to the wider imperatives with which Keating sought to associate them. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, this amounted to a discursive strategy on Howard’s part, enabling him to present his own political agenda as a necessary
‘corrective’ to Keating’s ‘excesses’ and so providing him with the political space to advance his own alternative position on each of these ‘Big Picture’ items. Contrary to Keating and his ‘Big Picture’, Howard argued that it was not necessary for Australia to jettison its British heritage if it was to respond effectively to globalisation or engage constructively with the Asian region and the wider world. In this way, he articulated an alternative to each of Keating’s ‘Big Picture’ items, and did so in ways which, we shall see, explicitly sought to re-affirm the ‘crimson thread’.

**Respective Backgrounds**

John Howard and Paul Keating’s origins do much to explain the fundamentally different attitude each adopted to what Henry Parkes called Australia’s ‘crimson thread of kinship’ to the United Kingdom. Both came to maturity in the 1950s and 1960s when the ‘crimson thread’ was still seen, by many Australians, in almost ‘umbilical’ terms.

John Howard grew up in a middle class, Protestant, Liberal Party voting family for whom loyalty to Australia’s British connections still had some meaning. As Howard describes this:

My parents…..were staunchly anti-communist and saw Britain and America, in that order, as our real friends (Howard 2010, 23).

Keating, on the other hand, grew up amidst Labor Party loyalties. Some members of the Australian Labor Party, particularly those, like Keating, with Irish Catholic roots, had a different attitude to Australia’s connections with the United Kingdom compared to people such as John Howard’s parents.² While the roots of this attitude lay in Ireland, and its centuries-long experience of English colonization, it also informed the expression, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia, of strong radical and nationalist sentiments.
among elements of the Australian working class, articulated in such late nineteenth century print media as *The Bulletin*, and was often accompanied by a hostility to Australia’s links with the United Kingdom (Turner 1982a, 26). Left-wing Australian historians in the 1950s and 1960s sought to give expression to this in their idea of a ‘radical nationalist tradition’ (Turner 1982b, 4. See Turner 1982a, 26-27).

Keating’s political mentor in his early years, prior to entering federal parliament, was former N.S.W. premier, Jack Lang (Edwards 1996, 58-63). Whereas many Australian politicians saw Australia’s repayment of public debt to the United Kingdom, during the Great Depression, as a matter of ‘honour’, as well as ‘Empire loyalty’, Lang, as N.S.W. Premier, had no such deference and no such loyalties. In 1931 he advocated suspension of government payments to British bondholders, and in 1932 suffered vice-regal dismissal from office, arising from a separate issue concerning payment of state monies into the federal treasury (Nairn 2014).

Paul Keating shared with Lang an absence of deference and loyalty when it came to Australia’s relationship to the United Kingdom. In the face of another vice-regal dismissal – that of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam by Governor-General Sir John Kerr in 1975 – Keating is on public record as saying that if this had happened to him as Prime Minister, he would have refused to accept the dismissal, placed the Governor-General under ‘house arrest’, and then gone to the people at election as the Prime Minister (ABC 2005). Indeed, he claims that as a junior minister in the Whitlam Government, he gave this advice at the time to senior Labor parliamentarian, Fred Daley (ABC 2005). As Keating put it: ‘You just can't have a position where some pumped up bunyip potentate dismisses an elected government’ (ABC 2005).

Of course, had Keating’s advice been taken, Australia could have been placed in the sort of internecine situation that Thomas Hobbes so feared, because, when push comes to shove, s.
68 of the Australian Constitution declares that ‘[t]he command in chief of the naval and military forces of the Commonwealth is vested in the Governor-General as the Queen’s representative’, not the Prime Minister (Commonwealth of Australia 1997, s. 68). All in all, however, such incidents show how Keating, like his political mentor, Jack Lang, is imbued with a complete absence of deference and loyalty when it comes to Australia’s links with the British Crown.

**Keating’s ‘Big Picture’**

In terms of reform, Keating aligned his Prime Ministership with what he called his ‘Big Picture’. The ‘Big Picture’, we saw, was centered around four key policy themes – reconciliation with Australia’s indigenous people, republicanism, multiculturalism and increasing integration with Asia – all of which Keating saw as central to Australia’s engagement with its region and a wider globalized world. Keating advanced these ideals as Prime Minister at a time when Australia was officially in recession, with over a million unemployed. In these circumstances (according to Liberal Party polling) the ‘Big Picture’ was perceived by many among the Australian public as testament to Keating’s disconnection from the ‘bread and butter’ concerns of ordinary Australians (Williams 1997, 46-47, 80, 97-98). Yet such was the intensity of Keating’s focus on leadership, reform and Australia’s need to alter its identity in the face of the new challenges of the twenty-first century, that the polls did not sway him:

Keating’s Big Picture did not deliver success at the ballot box. For Keating, however, these ideas transcended the tyranny of the present. This is what made him such a political freak. He implanted his ideas on Labor’s hill as a beacon to inspire future generations and to sustain Labor’s soul….Keating was confident that as the years
passed these beliefs, one by one, would become accepted Australian policy. His vision, he would say later, was for the future (Kelly 2009, 5).

The ‘Big Picture’ was meant to provide the political and cultural equivalent to the economic reforms that had occupied Keating’s years as Treasurer. Just as his economic reforms had required a deliberate break from what he called the ‘sclerotic’ economic policies and practices of the highly regulated and protectionist pre-1983 years (Keating 1992c, 1242), so the ‘Big Picture’ required a conscious break from what Keating perceived as the accretions and ossifications inherent in many of Australia’s political and cultural traditions, not least its links with the United Kingdom, which, as we shall see, he believed had kept Australia locked in a backward focus upon its past, preventing it from confronting its future in the Asian region and a globalized world. If Australia was to embrace its future by endorsing the ‘Big Picture’ then Keating believed this required a definite severing of the ‘crimson thread’.

**Keating and the ‘Crimson Thread’**

As Prime Minister, Keating attacked the overt symbolism of Australia’s links with the United Kingdom. This was evident in his criticism of the Australian flag. As he put it in Parliament:

I do not believe….that the symbols and the expression of the full sovereignty of Australian nationhood can ever be complete while we have a flag with the flag of another country in the corner of it (Keating 1994, 1319).

However Keating’s most direct assault on Australia’s U.K. heritage occurred immediately after the 1992 royal tour of Australia. Keating was accused, in Parliament, by the Liberal Opposition, of lacking ‘respect’ for the Queen because he mentioned, in her presence, Australia’s growing distance from the United Kingdom and its increasing integration with the Asian region. Keating responded in a way that showed not only his vitriolic attitude to the imperial legacy in Australia but also his belief that the Liberal and National Parties were
thoroughly complicit with this legacy. Addressing himself to these parties in Parliament, Keating declared:

I was told that I did not learn respect at school. I learned one thing: I learned about self-respect and self-regard for Australia—not about some cultural cringe to a country which decided not to defend the Malayan peninsula, not to worry about Singapore and not to give us our troops back to keep ourselves free from Japanese domination. This was the country that you people wedded yourself to, and even as it walked out on you and joined the Common Market, you were still looking for your MBEs and your knighthoods, and all the rest of the regalia that comes with it. You would take Australia right back down the time tunnel to the cultural cringe where you have always come from….These are the same old fogies who doffed their lids and tugged the forelock to the British establishment…..

Two months after this parliamentary statement, Keating returned in Parliament to this same theme, again stigmatizing any residual loyalties to the United Kingdom (such as he ascribed to the Liberal and National Party opposition) as a mark, not only of anachronism, but of disloyalty to Australia, or at least an absence of Australian patriotism:

While many of our institutions, our traditions and even our attitudes are British, we are not….. While we share much of our history with Britain, our history is our own, and our present and our future are most certainly our own….. No. I am proud of Australia. It is not Britain. We are not British. We are Australians. That is the point. Honourable members opposite do not understand that this is the Australian nation; this is not the British nation. They can never grasp it. They could not grasp it in the Second World War. Menzies, their founder, tried to separate and distinguish Britain's interests from those of Australia and, in the end, could not. Curtin, free of any pangs of loyalty to Britain, brought the troops home. This the Liberal Party's founder called a blunder. To bring our troops back from the Middle East to defend our continent from a Japanese invasion, Menzies called a blunder….The Liberal Party has always been a lickspittle to these interests – always. It has always been confused. It has never been proud to be Australian.

This was the dichotomy that Keating sought to present to the parliamentary Opposition and to the Australian public during his Prime Ministership. Either one was ‘proudly Australian’ or
one had sympathetic ties to the United Kingdom. Keating derided such Anglo-loyalties, at least as exhibited by parliamentary members of the Liberal and National parties, describing these loyalties not only as a form of ‘cultural cringe’ but also as a ‘sterile ideology’ (Keating 1992a, 374). He referred to the parliamentary members of these parties themselves as ‘the remnants of Australia’s failed upper class, the bunyip aristocracy’ (Keating 1991, 1901). He also claimed that they could never, at any point in their history, meet the challenges of modernity (Keating 1992b, 1850-51).

Keating articulated his ‘Big Picture’ as explicitly designed to overcome these limitations and meet these challenges, primary among which, he believed, was Australia’s need to engage with the Asian region. Again addressing the Opposition in Parliament as Prime Minister, Keating sought to discursively construct this engagement as the litmus test of Australia’s ability to meet the exigencies of a contemporary world, and presented Australia’s historical and constitutional ties to the United Kingdom as a direct impediment to this:

[T]o make our way in the world, and particularly this part of the world, we have to be entirely certain of who we are, what we are, and what we wish to do…… Those opposite are not certain. They want to keep these old links with Europe….. You talk about Indonesia; yet in your day you opposed its independence. You have never seen Australia as part of that region. You have never taken an interest in it…..The fact is that most Asian countries are very confused about Australia. They are not sure whether we want to trade with them. They are not sure whether we want to be part of the area. They are not sure whether it is simply tokenism. They are certainly unsure of us when we turn up all the time with the Union Jack in the corner of our flag…..

When Keating made these statements, John Howard was not Opposition leader, but rather Opposition spokesperson for Industrial Relations, first under Opposition leader John Hewson, and then Alexander Downer. Yet from the Opposition front bench, his interjections during Keating’s speeches were vociferous. Howard was the member for the North Sydney seat of
Bennelong. At one point, when Keating was delivering his earlier speech above, concerning ‘respect’ and ‘self-respect’, the Speaker of the House stopped Keating, and, facing the Liberal and National Party benches, declared:

Order! There is far too much noise. Honourable members on my left will cease interjecting. The honourable member for Dundas will cease interjecting. I think the honourable member for Bennelong is going to have a heart attack if his face goes any redder, so he might cease interjecting too (Speaker 1992, 374. Emphasis added).

**Howard’s Response to Keating’s ‘Big Picture’**

We will now consider Howard’s response to each of the four policy components of Keating’s ‘Big Picture’ – reconciliation, republicanism, multiculturalism and engagement with Asia. In particular, we shall consider the extent to which Howard presented these policies themselves, or the manner in which Keating sought to advance them, as a divisive, exaggerated or unnecessary response to the wider imperatives which Keating sought to achieve.

Further, we shall see how Howard’s construction of the ‘Big Picture’ in these terms was itself a discursive strategy. This strategy allowed Howard the political space to advance his own political agenda – an agenda which, like Keating, placed at its center the question of Australia’s relationship to the United Kingdom, and the relevance of this to Australia’s present and future.

**Response One: Engagement with Asia**

Outside of Parliament, Howard’s response to Keating’s ‘Big Picture’ was direct, and came as early as 1993, in a speech Howard delivered to the *Samuel Griffith Society*. In this speech,
Howard sought to depict the ‘Big Picture’ as divisive – insisting that key elements of it, such as engagement with Asia, were presented in a way that imposed ‘a wholly unnecessary choice between our past and our future’ (Howard 1993, 3). Indeed, Howard argued that the fact that Keating ‘should see the issue as a choice marks his failure as a national leader’ (Howard 1993, 3).

When Howard re-occupied the role of Opposition leader, on January 30, 1995, after a hiatus of almost six years, he continued to emphasise what he saw as the false dichotomies that, he believed, Keating was seeking to impose on Australians concerning engagement with Asia, demanding of them a series of choices which Howard saw as wholly unnecessary:

The Coalition Parties have a clear set of priorities to advance Australia’s long-term interests. We do not believe that Australia faces some kind of exclusive choice between our past and our future, between our history and our geography. We see such a choice as a phoney and irrelevant one proposed by those with ulterior motives. We do not have to abandon or apologise for our heritage to contribute to Asia and to welcome Asia’s importance to our future.7

In these statements, we see a basic discursive strategy which Howard adopted as early as 1993, in which he sought to depict Keating, and the manner in which Keating advanced his policy agenda, as extreme and/or divisive, imposing unnecessary dichotomies and mutually exclusive choices upon Australians. On matters such as Australia’s engagement with Asia, Howard sought to provide an alternative perspective, which, in rejecting Keating’s position, sought to advance a conception of Australia as a ‘European’ society rather than an Asian one:

No argument is more insulting to Australia’s dignity and sense of independence than the one which says that we must change our emblems or institutions to please the nations of the Asian/Pacific region, or, indeed, any other region. It is also uncomprehending of the extent to which many Asian countries respect those who, in turn, respect their own sense of history and culture……In cultural, historical and political terms, Australia is a European nation. It is firmly part of the western world, sharing its democratic ideals and liberal values. We also
help comprise a loose group of English-speaking peoples. Nothing can, or will, alter that. To pretend otherwise is to deny reality, and to be ashamed of something of which we ought not to feel ashamed.  

Howard insisted that this ‘reality’ of Australia as a ‘European nation’ did not impose a choice upon Australians, concerning their relationship with Asia, such as Keating proposed, wherein they were asked to choose between their ‘history’ and ‘geography’, their ‘past’ and their ‘future’. Rather, Howard argued it was possible to affirm Australia’s ‘European’, and specifically ‘British’, heritage, and still engage effectively with Asia. In this respect, Howard believed it was possible to attain Keating’s objective without severing the ‘crimson thread’:

There is full bipartisan political support in Australia for this country totally involving itself as an economic and political participant in the region, on the basis of mutual respect for the values and institutions of each other…. [But] [o]ur involvement in Asia must not be at the cost of our deep links with Britain, the rest of Europe and the United States. Nothing is more unnecessary, artificial or indeed destructive than the sense of choice now being forced upon Australians by the Prime Minister. We can be full citizens of our region without jettisoning our ties with others. No choice is necessary (Howard 1993, 5).

Response Two: Australian Republicanism

The burden of ‘unnecessary’ choice and division, which Howard ascribes to the Asian element of Keating’s ‘Big Picture’, was also evident, Howard insisted, when it came to the republican element. Once again, Howard argued, Keating was forcing Australians to choose between a ‘past’ and a ‘future’ – in this case a British past and a republican future - where their loyalty as Australians was held to be in the balance, pending which option they chose:

Paul Keating is the first Australian Prime Minister to openly and consistently advocate turning Australia into a republic. He is Australia’s best known republican……[T]he Prime Minister has sought, since this debate began, to politicise Australian patriotism. An express or implied theme of most of his comments is that it is more
Australian to be a republican than it is to support the present Constitution. He has also brought to the debate his penchant for division and polarisation. His arguments for change are those of a wounder and a wrecker, not a healer and a builder….(Howard 1993, 2).

Keating, we saw, established a causal link within his ‘Big Picture’ between the imperative of republicanism and engagement with Asia, insisting that one was a necessary vehicle for the other. This is because, he said, Asians were ‘confused’ about Australia, and ‘not sure’ whether we wanted to be part of the region, given the maintenance of our symbolic and constitutional ties to the United Kingdom. To divest ourselves of these ties, therefore, by becoming a republic, was, in Keating’s view, to enhance our capacity to engage with Asia. Further, we saw, Keating presented any residual adherence to these ties, among Australians, as evidence of ‘cultural cringe’.11

We saw above that Howard sought to reverse Keating’s discursive strategies in this regard, insisting that there was no need for Australia to jettison its U.K. heritage in order to engage effectively with Asia. Further, in response to Keating’s remarks about ‘cultural cringe’, Howard argued that to the extent that Keating and his supporters wished Australia to become a republic, thereby sundering at least one part of the ‘crimson thread’, in order for Australia to engage more effectively with Asia, it is they who are guilty of a much greater ‘cringe’:

To the extent that those self-same critics would have us uproot a system of government which has given Australia one hundred years of stability, unity and tolerance, in the naive belief that it will win us friends in the Asian/Pacific region, then they themselves are guilty of an infinitely greater cringe (Howard 1993, 5).
Response Three: Reconciliation

We have seen that ‘reconciliation’ with Australia’s indigenous inhabitants was one of the four major elements of Keating’s ‘Big Picture’ agenda. As part of this ‘reconciliation’ process, Keating delivered his famous ‘Redfern Speech’, in 1993, to inaugurate the International Year of the World’s Indigenous People. In this speech, Keating declared, in relation to Aboriginal people and their place in Australian society, that ‘non-Aboriginal Australians’ needed to engage in an ‘act of recognition’, not least a recognition of the detrimental impact of the British, and their Australian descendants, on the Aboriginal nations:

Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing; we took the traditional lands, and smashed the traditional way of life; we brought the diseases and the alcohol; we committed the murders; we took the children from their mothers; we practiced discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice, and our failure to imagine that these things could be done to us. With some noble exceptions we failed to make the most basic human response, and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask how would I feel if this was done to me. As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded us all (Keating 2014b. Emphasis added).

Keating’s speech, openly pointing to the injustices in white Australia’s treatment of Aboriginals, is widely recognized as a landmark in the ‘reconciliation’ process. It is also one more act in Keating’s conscious repudiation of the ‘crimson thread’, given that it was the British in Australia who initiated the disposssession from which, he insists, all else he refers to followed.

John Howard, as Prime Minister, advanced, on these issues, a very different discourse to Keating. Although acknowledging the past injustices inflicted upon indigenous Australians, Howard argued for ‘balance’ in the understanding of Australian history, including the role of the British within it, and counselled against what he called a ‘black armband’ view of this history, which wholly denigrated both the fact and the consequence of British colonization and settler development of Australia (Howard 1996a, 9-10; Howard 1996b, 5976; Howard
1996c, 6158). He advanced a similar perspective in a speech he delivered as Prime Minister to another landmark event in what was formally known as the Reconciliation process - the *Reconciliation Convention* of 1997:

> [W]e need to acknowledge openly that the treatment accorded to many indigenous Australians over a significant period of European settlement represents the most blemished chapter in our history. Clearly, there were injustices done and no-one should obscure or minimise them. We need to acknowledge as a nation what European settlement has meant for the first Australians, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and in particular the assault on their traditions and the discrimination and violence they endured over many decades….In facing the realities of the past, however, we must not join those who would portray Australia’s history since 1788 as little more than a disgraceful record of imperialism, exploitation and racism. Such a portrayal is a gross distortion and deliberately neglects the overall story of great Australian achievement that is there in our history to be told, and such an approach will be repudiated by the overwhelming majority of Australians who are proud of what this country has achieved although inevitably acknowledging the blemishes in its past history. Australians of this generation should not be required to accept guilt and blame for past actions and policies over which they had no control (Howard 1997).

It was this last point, concerning generational ‘guilt’ and ‘blame’, which led Howard, as Prime Minister, to refuse an apology, on behalf of the Commonwealth, to those Aboriginals removed from their parents as part of state policies in previous decades, and generically referred to as the ‘Stolen Generations’. As he put it in the wake of the Rudd Government apology in 2008:

> I do not believe as a matter of principle that one generation can accept responsibility for the acts of [an] earlier generation….In some cases, children were wrongly removed, in other cases they were removed for good reason, in other cases they were given up and in other cases, the judgement on the removal is obscure or difficult to make (Howard 2008).

Such a position on inter-generational guilt and responsibility for past treatment of indigenous Australians was not an outlook Howard adopted late, during his term as Prime Minister.
Rather, it was an outlook that he advanced as early as 1988, in his *Future Directions* policy document in his first term as Opposition Leader:

Displays of guilt about the past treatment of Aborigines….do nothing to overcome genuine problems. While we all live with the consequences of misdirected or ill-informed policies of the past in this, as in any other area, Australians today, be they of European or Aboriginal descent, are not guilty of those actions and should not be made to feel they are. Guilt is not hereditary (Liberal/National 1988, 96. See Howard 1996c, 6158).

In insisting on the idea of ‘balance’ in the understanding of Australian history, and repudiating the ‘Black Arm Band’ approach to the same, Howard is able to insist that recognition of past injustices to indigenous Australians is still consistent with what he refers to above as a ‘pride’ in what the ‘country has achieved’. Given the integral role of the British in this ‘achievement’, Howard’s position allows him to acknowledge what he calls the ‘blemishes’ in Australian history whilst still affirming the ‘crimson thread’.

**Response Four: Multiculturalism**

It is in Howard’s response to multiculturalism, the final element in Keating’s ‘Big Picture’ agenda, that we once again perceive him affirming the ‘crimson thread’ and insisting on an inextricable link between the United Kingdom and Australia. Howard’s response to multiculturalism did not begin as a reaction to Keating’s policies. State-endorsed multiculturalism has been a permanent feature of the Australian polity since Prime Minister Malcom Fraser introduced the policy in 1978 (Commonwealth of Australia 1999, 25). In his 1988 *Future Directions* document, Howard, as Opposition leader, was critical of what he saw as the Hawke Government’s advancement of multiculturalism, which he believed had ‘turned the original aims of multiculturalism back on themselves and elevated the differences between us over the similarities we share’ (Liberal/National 1988, 89). Howard argued that
multiculturalism resulted in this ‘elevation of differences’ when it sought to advance a ‘cultural pluralism’ which implied that other more recent cultures have an equal place within this ‘pluralism’ relative to a pre-existing ‘Australian way of life’:

We endorse the objectives of a cohesive society within which people are free to express their own identity. The sharing of our heritages in an open society that encourages the exchange of ideas and cultural experiences will enrich our nation and strengthen our sense of unity. But there is a vast difference between tolerance, respect, understanding and indeed welcome for that diversity that now makes up this country and its unique identity and a Government committed to elevate a whole range of different cultures, customs and values and accord them all equal status within the Australian way of life. We want to see one Australia proud of its diverse heritage and able to derive benefit as a nation from its individual groups. We do not want to see an Australia of individual groups, each stressing their differences and only linked in the loosest of ways by a mutual tolerance of diversity (Liberal/National 1988, 92-93).

This emphasis on a dominant culture, or ‘Australian way of life’, in relation to which other cultures have a less than equal status, is a clear departure from the official framework of multiculturalism that had been in existence in Australia since 1978. The Prime Minister who inaugurated that framework, Malcolm Fraser, specifically declared, in 1981, that multiculturalism did not involve the endorsement of a dominant culture, but rather the endorsement of a dominant set of ‘fundamental values’ within which a plurality of cultures would coexist:

Multiculturalism is about…..cultural and ethnic difference, set within a framework of shared fundamental values which enable them to coexist on a complementary rather than a competitive basis. It involves respect for the law and for our democratic institutions and processes. Insisting on a core area of common values is no threat to multiculturalism but its guarantee, for it provides the minimal conditions on which the wellbeing of all is seated.13
Howard’s model, by contrast, has much more in common with the ‘assimilationist’ model of Australian settlement which preceded the multicultural model, and which multiculturalism was designed to replace. In this ‘assimilationist’ model, immigrants were expected, at a cultural level, to identify with and endorse a dominant culture, where this dominant culture was officially referred to, at the time, as the ‘Australian way of life’ (Wilton and Bosworth 1984, 17-18; Jupp 1992, 131; Jupp 2003: 22; Tate 2009, 104). It is this same term that Howard uses in his 1988 *Future Directions* statement above.

However it was towards the end of his final term as Prime Minister, in 2006, that Howard became quite vocal concerning his reservations about multiculturalism. This was almost twenty years after he had first articulated such reservations in his *Future Directions* document. As we shall see, he again pointed to what he saw as the divisive implications of multiculturalism, arising from its potential to undermine a sense of national unity by engaging in an ‘elevation of differences’ (what he refers to below as a ‘federation of cultures’). He also affirmed the ‘crimson thread’ by identifying what he called a ‘core culture’ (but which, in the *Future Directions* document, he referred to as an ‘Australian way of life’) which he now declares is inherently ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and which (like the ‘Australian way of life’) constitutes a primary norm with which other cultures in Australia ought to ‘blend’:

Everyone knows that I don’t use the word multiculturalism very much and the reason I don’t use it very much is that is has been used in a very zealous……fashion by some over the years. To many people multiculturalism simply means that we are tolerant to people of different cultural backgrounds. Now if that’s all it means, then it’s a fine concept. We are tolerant to people of different backgrounds but over the years at its zenith, the more zealous multiculturalism basically said that this country should be a federation of cultures. You can’t have a nation with a federation of cultures. You can have a nation where a whole variety of cultures constantly influence and mould and change and blend in with the mainstream culture, but a nation that doesn’t have a core culture and the core culture of this nation is very clear; we are an outshoot of western civilisation. Because we
speak the English language our cultural identity is very heavily Anglo-Saxon. It doesn’t mean that it isn’t distinctively Australian, but you have to recognise that there is a core set of values in this country (Howard 2006a. See Howard 2006b).

Once again, this emphasis on a ‘core’ ‘Anglo-Saxon’ culture as the ‘mainstream culture’ with which other cultures ought to blend (like the similar remarks of Howard’s *Future Directions* document almost twenty years before) is at odds with the official model of multiculturalism, inaugurated in 1978, and discussed above. Howard acknowledged as much when he declared, in 2006, that it was his government’s policy to depart from the pluralistic model of multiculturalism, as it had hitherto been practiced, in the direction of ‘assimilation’ (though, he tells us, stopping short of a return to ‘assimilation’ itself) and specifically identified this as a reversal of Keating’s commitments:

I think one of the reasons why people have been accepting of all of this is that they feel they have a Government and a Prime Minister that is in favour of what I might call a slightly less zealous multiculturalism than was practiced by my predecessor…..Not a return to assimilation so much, but somewhere in between, which is what people want (Howard 2006c. See Howard 2007).

This same emphasis on a ‘core’ ‘Anglo-Saxon’ culture was evident in Howard’s introduction of a ‘Citizenship Test’, in 2006, for all applicants for Australian citizenship.14 The Discussion Paper which the Howard Government released as a prelude to the introduction of the Test went even further, in assimilationist terms, than Howard’s reference to a ‘core culture’ above. It referred to the Australian polity as defined by ‘one overriding culture’, and conflated culture and civic values by incorporating within the concept of ‘culture’ (or what was again referred to as an ‘Australian way of life’) a specific set of political and civic commitments:

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Australia has successfully combined people into one family with one overriding culture, based on a set of common values. These values include our respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual, support for democracy, our commitment to the rule of law, the equality of men and women, the spirit of the fair go, of mutual respect and compassion for those in need. It is also critical that [new citizens] understand the Australian way of life and our shared values and demonstrate a commitment to contributing to that way of life and accepting those values. A formal citizenship test could be an important part of that process ensuring that people are ready and willing to fully participate in the Australian community (Commonwealth of Australia 2006, 5. My addition).

In conflating culture and values in this way, Howard was able to move away from the original Fraser multicultural model, which, we saw, had clearly separated the two, and instead advance the ‘Australian way of life’ as a ‘core’ or ‘overriding’ culture, widening it to include not only customs and mores distinctive of that ‘way of life’ but also the normative values of liberal democracy, and insisting that all these arose from ‘Anglo-Saxon’ foundations. In this way, Howard was able, once again, to affirm the ‘crimson thread’.15

Howard and Keating’s ‘Big Picture’

Howard’s responses to Keating’s four ‘Big Picture’ items reveal two features of Howard’s politics and outlook as Prime Minister. Firstly, they show that Howard’s response to Keating was guided not simply by what Howard perceived as the need for a necessary ‘corrective’ to what he saw as the ‘division’ and ‘excess’ of Keating’s ‘Big Picture’. Rather, these responses show that Howard was advancing a particular political agenda of his own, part of which (as in the case of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘inter-generational guilt’) involved values and judgments that Howard was espousing as early as 1988, in his Future Directions document, prior to Keating’s period as Prime Minister.
Howard responded to Keating’s ‘Big Picture’ by declaring that what was needed was a ‘sense of balance, objectivity and honesty in drawing lessons from our past’, which he contrasted to the ‘politicised’ interpretation of that past, for specific partisan purposes, that he associated with Keating (Howard 1996a, 2. See Howard 1995b). Yet this appeal to ‘balance’ and ‘objectivity’, in allowing Howard to present his position as merely a ‘corrective’ to the ‘excesses’ of Keating, and so an exercise in ‘moderation’, was, we have seen, itself a discursive strategy, providing Howard with the political space to advance his own political agenda, centered on a very different conception of Australia’s history and identity.

The second feature revealed by Howard’s response to Keating’s ‘Big Picture’ is the extent to which, despite their differences, Howard’s political discourses were, at one level, played out on the same political terrain as those of Keating. This concerned the importance which each assigned to Australia’s relationship to the United Kingdom, or what we have called the ‘crimson thread’. The fact that each assigned a contrary significance to this relationship, and a very different prognosis regarding its future, does not belie the fact that each nevertheless saw this question as being of fundamental importance to the Australia of their time.

**Conclusion**

We saw that Paul Keating, as Prime Minister, identified those who affirmed Australia’s historical, symbolic and constitutional ties to the United Kingdom, as wanting not only in terms of their loyalty, patriotism and commitment to Australian interests, but also as jeopardizing Australia’s future in the Asian region. Only if Australia broke with those antecedents, Keating argued, would it be able to effectively negotiate its place in this region and a wider globalized world. Keating, in retirement, was still advancing this same theme as late as 2011:
The seminal event in our lifetimes now is the re-establishment of China’s position in the international system…..The advent of the modern China is going to change the way the world functions, but more particularly the Asia-Pacific. So…..we’ve got to see that event. We’ve got to see Australia in here. But here we are this week….still covering a visit by the Queen…..You know…..waving that embarrassing flag. I’m not just beating a drum here…..How do we approach this massive state, China, all the political and economic energy that’s arising out of North Asia….South-East Asia, and that massive state to our North, Indonesia, and here we are, attached to a worn-out old European monarchy….We’re going around Asia saying, ‘Oh, we’re the new Australian nation. Oh, by the way….our head of state is Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain’. ‘Oh, is she?’ ‘Yes’. ‘And let me have a look at your flag. Oh, isn’t this the flag of Great Britain?’ ‘No, that’s in the corner’.16

Yet it was John Howard who, in refusing the choices that Keating posed between Australia’s future and its past, its history and its geography, sought to reverse Keating’s discursive strategies and, in the period after Keating’s term of office, actively affirm Australia’s links to the United Kingdom. For both Prime Ministers, these links were of vital importance to Australia’s future. For Howard, this was because they amounted to a reality whose resonance still needed to be affirmed. For Keating, it was because they amounted to a legacy that Australia needed to overcome. In other words, for both, the ‘crimson thread’, far from being a threadbare anachronism, remained a vital issue for Australian politics. Their agonistic struggle therefore kept it at center stage, on the Australian political agenda, at a time when many might have thought it a matter of purely historical interest.

Notes


2. “Successive generations of Keatings had lived for hundreds of years in Ireland” (Edwards 1996, 31).

3. See note 1 above.


8. Howard 1993, 4-5.

9. See note 6 above.

10. See note 6 above. See also note 16 below.

11. See notes 4 and 5 above.

12. See notes 7 and 8 above.


15. This process was again evident in the official handbook which the Howard Government produced for all Citizen Test applicants, once the Citizenship Test was introduced (cf. Commonwealth of Australia 2007, 1).


References


