

James Curran *The Power of Speech. Australian Prime Ministers Defining the National Image*, Melbourne University Press 2004, xvi + 314pp, paperback \$34.95

BY DON AITKIN

What is it that binds Australians together? Paul Kelly thinks that is the central question of this engaging and important book, for which he wrote the Foreword. But I think James Curran actually asked two rather different questions. When recent Prime Ministers have wanted to talk, through the mass media, to their fellow citizens about what it means to be an Australian, what language did they use? And how did that language change over time?

In order to answer his questions Curran has read and analysed hundreds of Prime Ministerial speeches over the last fifty years. He writes well, and the scholastic apparatus of the PhD thesis from which the book has been constructed never gets in the way. In the past half-century Australia has evolved from a rather constipated British dominion into an effervescent, creative multi-cultural society that is something of a model, in these respects, for the global world of the 21st century. So the question of national identity (not 'national image' as in the title) has been close to the surface in very many debates within our society. Prime Ministers certainly have a most significant role in setting some of the terms of that debate.

It is illuminating to see the change in language over time. Surprisingly, Curtin and Chifley seem to have been no less Australian 'Britons' in their outlook than was R. G. Menzies, while none of their successors has beaten a loudly nationalist drum. One reason is that, as Curran plausibly argues, 'nationalism' has had a bad press in the post-war world. Another is that Australians have not, at least until very recently, seemed to want to be great flag-wavers. Our style, in contrast to the Americans and even to the British, has been rather low-key. A third reason has been the increasingly diverse ethnic character of Australian society, which presents a real challenge to anyone wanting to give voice to a new definition of 'Australia'. Too little attention to our British origins may put off the great majority who possess that ancestry; too much may put off not only those without it but also many who have it, but see those origins as irrelevant. There is a difficult line to draw here, and Curran shows that most Prime Ministers in recent times have walked it uncertainly.

There can be little doubt that we grow up to accept our country and its social order as part of reality. They just are. If our parents are critical of some aspects of it then we usually come to adopt that perspective, just as we tend to share our parents' political partisanship, their religion, their football team, and so on. When we grow up we may develop some new and different perspectives on these matters, and those perspectives are part of the reality that our own children grow to accept. This is the stuff of 'political socialisation'. And political leaders are hugely aware of it.

I agree with Curran that Prime Ministers and their speeches provide an important insight into this continuing process. But I retain some reservations about his discrimination in the use of the speeches. Every speech has a context, a timing, a specific audience and a reason. If you are asked to give a speech to the Royal Commonwealth Society you are likely to talk about the importance of the Commonwealth. If you give a speech in London you are likely to stress the links between Britain and Australia. If you give an Australia Day address you will want to talk about the ties that bind us. I became a little worried that, for example, the evidence of the 'Britishness' of Curtin, Chifley and Menzies rests quite heavily on speeches given by them in London. A more thoroughgoing analysis would check those speeches against the great volume of contributions to parliamentary and political debate in Australia. That would have required a great deal more work, and I'm not suggesting that Curran should have done it.

For the most part, I found Curran to be most persuasive, and I enjoyed his book, a thoughtful and impressive contribution to a major question. I look forward to his next work.