THE POWER OF SPEECH: Australian Prime Ministers Defining the National Image, Melbourne University Press, 2004.

By James Curran,

DEATH SENTENCE, Random House, Sydney, 2003.
By Don Watson,

THE RHETORICAL PRIME MINISTER

Reviewer: Mark Rolfe*

I am convinced that both Paul Keating and John Howard would visibly wince in pain if any similarities between the two were drawn to their attention. However, both men are avid admirers of Winston Churchill, enthralled by the gift of this aristocrat to arm the people of a democracy with words. As James Curran notes in his new book, Churchill was the reason Keating entered public life. It was a Churchill remembered as a heroic wartime leader 'who inspired his people', a Churchill 'who stood up every week in the House of Commons and told those myopic equivocating cowards in his own party that Hitler was a criminal' (193). Our leaders no longer draw their inspiration and guidance from the gods and the semi-divine, as Alexander the Great did from Dionysus and Achilles, but from great mortals who blaze a tale into history.

It is an image of leadership based on the folk memory of Churchill's rhetoric, a memory that also incorporates fragments of rhetoric of other war leaders like Roosevelt and Lincoln, that has been an ideal of leadership and a touchstone to measure pretenders ever since. It is little wonder there has been a deliberate strategy by the White House since 9/11 to cast Bush and his 'crusade' in Iraq in a favourably moral light by invoking Churchill and the fight against tyranny.[1] This is known in rhetoric as an ethical appeal — what Aristotle called *ethos* — in which a speaker attempts to establish credibility and character with an audience. It is also no wonder that Keating said leadership 'is not about being popular; it's about being right and being strong . . . It's about doing what you think the nation requires, making profound judgements about profound issues'. But this did not gel with the previous sentence that claimed it 'will always be about having a conversation with the public'.[2]

However, it is a folk memory that has smoothed away the complexities of leadership and rhetoric. Forgotten is the divisive Churchill known in the 1920s to change his mind on everything bar the empire. Forgotten is the Roosevelt criticised

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1 Murphy, John M. 'Our Mission and Our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11th' in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 6(4), Winter 2003

2 P. Keating, *Advancing Australia*, p. 6. Unfortunately, Dr Curran neglected the part about a conversation (p. 206).

for his manipulation and deceit and who proclaimed: 'I am a juggler. I never let my right hand know what my left hand does'. Surely, this is the stereotype of a politician. Moreover, the folk ideal has the implied premise of a top-down, one-way process in which the leader and his rhetoric mould the mass of passive followers. This is the premise to *Death Sentence*, which is not only an acknowledged reprise of George Orwell's 1946 essay *Politics and the English Language* but is also, incidentally, a rumination on leadership. This is to be expected of Keating's speechwriter who deplores the waste uttered by Howard and wants our politicians to speak like Roosevelt in his 1933 inauguration address (p. 138) or Lincoln on the battlefield of Gettysburg (p. 84).

There is an interesting congruence of satire with rage against a group depicted as causing the debasement of language and society: Hobbes against priests and their Aristotelian obscurantism,[3] Orwell against totalitarians and their ideologies; the authors of *Yes, Minister* against politicians and their bureaucrats; and now Dr Watson who sees 'the public language' of political, bureaucratic and business leaders — 'the managers' (p. 1) — threatening our democracy. Just as Orwell asserted the decline of language was due to political and economic causes,[4] so Dr Watson asserts decay is due to the insidious seepage into our lives of the marketing and managerial language of the corporations throughout the public realm, spreading with the 'global company' (p. 20), globalisation (p. 41) and globalised American culture (p. 125). It has even crept through governments and their bureaucracies as they retreated from various activities (p. 28) with economic rationalism. There has been a narrowing of politics so that it resembles the corporate world and a consequent elimination of inspiration and independent thought (p. 55). Just as Orwell thought corrupt language spread through imitation,[5] so Dr Watson condemns the imitation — like that of parrots — which spreads *downsize, commitment, benchmarks, world's best practice, in terms of, value-added, customer,* and other such noxious pests.

It is the language of the powerful throughout history and now they are pompous corporate leaders (p. 36) and politicians who 'impose a language' (p. 10) upon everyone in the private and public sectors 'to think the same thoughts, or at least within the same *parameters*' (p. 27). Thinking, feeling, and need are suspended by this 'mechanical language' (p. 8), this 'sludge', this 'clag sandwich' which produces the verbal equivalent of the 'blank stare'. He is right to see some of the effects that can flow from the use of words such as *flexible* which has an evaluative effect assumed from its status as an inherent good. 'Flexible' work hours are now demanded of workers (p. 42), which becomes an imperative that staff *must* accommodate. Trade unions and industrial awards can be 'branded obsolescent' if

[3] Q. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in Hobbes in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1996

[4] G. Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', *Inside the Whale and other Essays*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 143.

[5] Orwell, op. cit., pp. 143, 154.

they aren't flexible. We are no longer citizens or even students at universities but customers or consumers, which have a range of different associations and thus expectations of the state and our role in political society.

This language is a global phenomenon but Australians are more susceptible to it because of our 'sad truth' (p. 67) as a laconic, material, pragmatic people without a lyrical, linguistic tradition and without founding political ideals like Americans. We are not loquacious like Americans (which makes one wonder why many of them listen to Bush) and 'perhaps' we needed a civil war or slavery (p. 70). Instead of Jefferson, Washington and Paine, we had Parkes, Menzies and Deakin, and British civilisation, institutions, empire and race (p. 74). Dr Watson is back with his concerns in *The Rabbit Syndrome* and the tendency among many Australian historians to assume a teleology of nationalism that can only be authentic if it is home-grown rather than from overseas.[6]

Dr Watson is clearly placing himself with the ordinary folk, by implication the 'weak', and so staking his *ethos* with those who command the moral high ground in a democracy — the sovereign 'people'. The postmodernists get a quick jab for their trouble but interestingly Dr Watson has a similar view of deadening language that flows from the top of society down to stifle and constrain the ranks below. This 'top-down' model of language is shared with most models of propaganda and so one finds frequent references to propaganda in Dr Watson's book (pp. 5, 106). Despite his assurances to keep things in perspective (p. 7), to be relaxed from the long historical view of language (p. 12), and to not worry Australia has turned 'proto-fascist' (p. 117), the evaluative effect of his argument is to see a peril to our democracy. He has it both ways by arguing it was ever thus but also that there is decay, which implies there was a time before the entropy occurred or became so bad.

I have no doubt much of this managerial language *is* diabolical and powerful, however, for all his facility with words, Dr Watson is not well versed in ideas about political language. Consider his definition that our threatened democracy depends on 'plain language': 'It depends upon common understanding. We need to feel safe in the assumption that words mean what they are commonly understood to mean' (p. 113). We need rhetoric that is 'less ambivalent' and a more 'unalloyed ideal like liberty or justice' (p. 73). Yet elsewhere he is perfectly aware of the 'various interpretations that words are open to' (p. 53) and that 'The art of connecting words creates shades of meaning' (p. 128). There is nothing apparently plainer than the word 'mateship', which is trotted out so often by John Howard. But, of course, mateship has had a variety of meanings, as Dr Watson is aware (p. 108), from its association with socialism by William Lane and others of the nineteenth century to the furore over Howard's attempt to include it in a preamble to the constitution. It is not merely Howard's deceit or blandness (pp. 107–8) at play here.

[6] N. Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian Identity: The Problem of Nationalism in Australian History and Australian Historiography', *Australian Historical Studies*, 32(116), 2001.

Just as Orwell derided 'meaningless words' like democracy, socialism, justice and freedom for having multiple meanings that cannot be reconciled,[7] so Dr Watson dismisses 'compassionate conservatism' and 'moral clarity' used by Bush and the Republicans as having no meaning (p.130) and aspirational voters and battlers (pp. 94, 95). Conservatism is, like the other abstractions above, an essentially contested concept that cannot be reduced to one fixed definition. The concept is internally complex because the words that are used to discuss it are disputable and open to various meanings. Therefore, there can be disagreement over the criteria for application of the concept. But there may also be disagreement over the application of the word to a situation. Moreover, the concept is not neutral in application to a situation for it is appraisive and this may lead to argument.[8] Such ambiguity is captured by the rhetorical term *amphiboly* — the use of language cast wide like a net to persuade as many people as possible by allowing a number of interpretations to be made. For when speaking (or writing), the greater the crowd, the more general one must be for to provide too much refinement is a disadvantage.[9] The upshot is there will not be one definition or common understanding for a term, which opens up the question of political vocabulary used by all political sides rather than simply seeing either the venality of political leaders like Howard and Bush (pp. 115–22) or the empty rhetoric of poll-driven speeches by over-cautious politicians (p. 136), which is a persistent complaint about leaders these days. Just as Orwell castigated euphemisms for camouflaging the indefensible, so does Dr Watson (p. 129). He thus perpetuates an ignorance of the ancient rhetorical tactic of redescription through euphemism and dysphemism known as *paradiastole*.

There is no Australian equivalent to the American academic study of presidential oratory, so Dr Curran's clear, well-researched and valuable book is welcome. He wishes to explain the desire of all the prime ministers from Holt to Howard to articulate 'a new language of national community' that became necessary in the 1960s with the decline of our British race ideal. This was 'a crisis of national meaning' (p. 7) and all prime ministers since then have grappled with the challenge to define the national image and community. All of them have done it with caution and unease (p. 3) and were somewhat 'ill-equipped' (p. 10) because of their fears of the xenophobic nationalist excesses since World War II.

External causes are 'the most critical' explanations for this national reassessment (p.71). Demographic changes due to the immigration program (p. 38) come after that. There was the withdrawal of Britain to the west of Suez and the courtship of the European Community and the worry world attitudes towards the White Australia policy which advertised our pride to be white and British (p. 7–11). Our leaders, apart from Keating, have rejected the radical nationalist myth and all have opted for the political legacy of Britishness stripped of its racial ideals, emphasising

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[7] Orwell, op. cit., p. 149.

[8] W. Connolly, *Terms of Political Discourse*, ch. 1; Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, ch. 9.

[9] Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, translated by J.H. Freese, Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann, London, 1982, p. 423.

the liberty, rule of law and democracy embodied in our institutional heritage. Unlike Dr Watson, Dr Curran rightly states more clearly elsewhere that Australian nationalism should not be judged to fit a European model of nationalism.[10]

Dr Curran is not afflicted with the distrust of rhetoric that is evident in others. He favourably notes Keating's advice that 'Politicians who believe in their cause are always conscious that they have a story to tell. Indeed the telling of it is an essential ingredient of success' (p. 15) and governments fail if they cannot convey one. Certainly, the lesson of Fia Cumming's book *Mates* is that Keating, Brereton, Carr and Richardson was their necessary apprenticeships and abilities in persuasion as the means to their successes. Dr Curran properly covers the general themes of political language used by each prime minister and these are presented in handy chapters on each man (apart form an overview from Menzies to Gorton) that are useful for teaching. Moreover, he outlines the dominant intellectual influences that shaped their ideas as young men.

It is therefore even more disappointing that in a book on the speeches of prime ministers there is no knowledge of the art of rhetoric or the Cambridge school of intellectual history and its interest in Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian. There is a narrow theoretical focus through the prism of nationalism, using Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith and thus Dr Curran overlooks the ways and means of deliberative rhetoric, the genre of rhetoric concerned with politics, shaped according to the diktats of democracy. So what Dr Curran takes to be the general inarticulate confusion of a whole generation of Australian political leaders caused by the loss of the British myth in the 1960s (p. 7), looks more like the specific verbal inadequacies of Holt and Gorton who were ill-equipped to meet the challenges of the decade as well as the dynamic Whitlam. No such afflictions tied his tongue. Dr Curran recognises in places that Whitlam enthusiastically adopted the rhetoric of change, modernity, 'the new' and 'new nationalism' current in 1960s Australia (pp. 7, 47), However, the domestic partisan debates variously described in the book are not integrated in the explanation of the language because of the focus on external reasons for change. There is no awareness that the need for a rhetor to consider the audience is crucial to success and this should figure as a domestic cause of change. Any attempt to 'lead . . . the people to a new understanding of themselves' (p. 14) must consider this, for leadership necessarily implies followers and thus a relationship, a 'conversation', not *simply* what a leader like Keating thinks is right. There was clear and recognised pressure on Gorton, the first prime minister to deploy 'new nationalism', to maintain Coalition pre-eminence with the public as 'agents of national renewal' (p. 9). The potency of Dr Curran's external causes actually derives from the manner of their discussion amongst Australians. One of the little-noted but frequent and intriguing aspects of Australian political discourse is the fact that commentators and politicians, such as Whitlam (p. 79), can utter 'eyes of the world' to audiences with the expectation it will have an effect and

[10] J. Curran, 'The "Thin Dividing Line": Australian Prime Ministers and the Problem of Australian Nationalism, 1949–1972', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 48(4), 2002, p. 486.

thus use it to frame a preferred policy outcome. At one stage at least, this would have demonstrated something about Australians in contrast to many white South Africans who did not care what the world thought about apartheid.

Dr Curran fails to note that US presidents are not only the sacred bearers of the national myth (p. 17) who attempt to define the nation's values and so persuade the public to support their policies over those of opponents. They attempt to use the presidency to enhance their *ethos* against opponents and still try to appear above the partisan fray. They will attempt to denude opponents of the American flag and wrap it around themselves and their party, and in the process claim to be providing the only true definition of the national identity. To do that their language will employ the Aristotelian topics of contraries (binary oppositions or dichotomies) and differences to distinguish themselves from their foe. Party leaders in Australia have always tried to do the same and Whitlam, Keating and Howard appear, inadvertently, in this book as prominent exponents of this tactic.

Whitlam appropriated 'new nationalism' because the adjective 'new' was effective to depict difference from opponents and emphasise rupture with the past, especially from the much derided 'Rip van Menzies' era. This is also evident in the use by Clinton, Blair and Latham of New Democrat and New Labour to distinguish themselves from previous party leaders and their failed electoral programs and Latham's current use of 'new generation' against Howard. Dr Curran believes there are 'contextual and conceptual problems' with the use of 'new nationalism' since it was never 'adequately explained' (p. 78) and always defined by what it was against, as if the only proper definition is one that is fixed and developed its essence from within. This was a 'new problem' (p. 92).

It was not. An implication of essentially contested concepts and Saussure's work is that words are relationally defined by other words and there can be statements of what they are not. For many decades Australians navigated their identity by asserting they were not Asian but British, yet also asserting differences from Britain and America,[11] just as New Zealanders asserted they were not Americans nor Australians.[12] For Whitlam and supporters 'new nationalism' meant *not* being subservient to the Americans — like the Coalition. Latham is currently copying this tactic. 'New nationalism' *was* taken to mean more than Gorton's ' "iron ore" nationalism' (p. 78) and was thus attached to culture and the arts, migrants, Aborigines, egalitarianism, fair play, economic nationalism, and a great range of issues and policies thought to be neglected by the Coalition (p. 79–101). This is the usual sort of career and web of terms in which a political word nestles. Thus repeated statements by prime ministers since Chifley distinguishing 'sensible'

[11] R. White, *Inventing Australia*, Sydney, 1981; Bell, P. & R. Bell, *Implicated: The United States in Australia*, Melbourne, 1993.

[12] Olssen, 'Lands of Sheep and Gold': the Australian Dimension to the New Zealand Past, 1840–1900', in *Tasman Relations: New Zealand and Australia, 1788–1988*, K. Sinclair (ed.), Auckland, 1987, p. 35; K. Sinclair, *Destiny Apart: New Zealand's Search for National Identity*, Wellington, 1986, p. 120.

nationalism from chauvinism can be read as establishing credibility by tapping into beliefs that Australian nationalism is not excessive like others, rather than unease within the speakers as Dr Curran believes. Keating repeated Whitlam's strategy with a similar list of issues connected to nationalism (chapter 5) and, of course, with a partisan eye to aligning the ALP with the future which would be republican, multicultural, social democratic, internationalised and engaged with Asia and condemning the Coalition as insular, racist, reactionary, monarchical, 'protected' and part of the 'backward past'. Howard merely deployed his own set of dichotomies. Howard deployed his own set of dichotomies which aligned the Coalition with Mainstream Australia and a nation-building narrative of history against the ALP and the politically-correct elites and minority 'vested interest groups.[13] Howard pitted himself with the 'weak', ordinary masses against a 'powerful' elite, just like Dr Watson!

It is no coincidence that the propaganda model of language and certain models of leadership rely on the premise of a top-down, one way process perpetrated by an elite. This was the essence of a tremendous fright about propaganda in America after 1919 amongst Walter Lippmann, the founders of the behaviouralist schools of social science such as Harold Lasswell and Charles Merriam and public relations people like Bernays. They also assumed from Freud and Le Bon an irrational, manipulable mass opinion in the now burgeoning big cities when mass media were just taking off and a view of language that had shifted from rhetoric to the communication of information necessary to the new corporations.[14] Like Hobbes, they wanted a language based on science and thus supposedly free of dispute, values and contestable definitions that would threaten political society. It meant having the right sort of leaders for such passive masses. Many continue such premises in their discussions of leadership and language today. ▲

[13] M. Rolfe, 'Free Speech, Political Correctness and the Rhetoric of Social Unity under John Howard', in *Just Policy*, no. 15, April 1999.

[14] M. Sproule, *Propaganda and Democracy: The American experience of media and mass persuasion*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1997.