RECONSTRUCTING AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

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Differing conceptions of Australian identity have been part of debates over economic restructuring throughout the eighties and nineties. Despite Howard's objections to what he sees as Keating's "Big Brother" attempts to hijack and manipulate national identity (Howard, 1995b: 1,2,5,8), both the Labor and Liberal parties have attempted to encourage the development of various forms of citizen identity that are closely related to their desired economic policy outcomes. I have suggested elsewhere that these forms of citizen identity are also closely related to differing forms of governmentality in that they encourage particular varieties of self-regulating and self-managing behaviour by citizens and economic actors (Johnson 1996a). In this respect, national identity also has implications for personal, group and workplace identity. For Keating, implementing policy was itself "a process of national... reinvention" and "national character building." (Keating, 1995c: 1011). It is therefore particularly interesting to look back and see where *Australia Reconstructed (AR)* fits into subsequent debates over national identity.

As one would expect, *AR's* version of national identity is much closer to Hawke and Keating's inclusive idea of citizen identity in a co-operative capitalism, where business and unions work together, than to Howard's view of self-reliant and individualistic citizen identity in an enterprise culture. It is a version of the social harmony ideology that has long been influential in Australian labour thought (Johnson, 1989). *AR* attempted to construct a "consensus society". Consensus was, of course, a catch-cry during the Hawke years, and Keating also had supported consensual forms of union and national identity, arguing that "conflict in the

workplace is not a quintessentially Australian way of operating" (Keating, 1995a: 1807).

However, *AR* had a very union-centred view of what this consensual union and employer identity would be like. Like Hawke and Keating, *AR* aimed to construct unionism and unionists in a less confrontationist mode. But in its version of strategic unionism, businesspeople and unionists were to work together to establish industry policies that were far more interventionist than those actually introduced during the Hawke period. Although proposed interventions were designed to stimulate wealth creation, government support for industry was to come with union strings attached (*AR*: 169; 197). *AR*'s dependence on the market was still excessive in the view of many left critics (Sharp, 1988) and the document seemed to uncritically assume that "the maximum possible level of growth and development" would be in everyone's interests and provide rising standards of living for the population as a whole (*AR*: 195). Nonetheless, the Report went much further than either the Hawke or Keating governments were prepared to go in encouraging involvement by both unions and government in business decision-making processes (Bell, 1997: 220; Stewart, 1994: 269). *AR*'s version of union identity involved active citizenship in regard to both government and managerial decision-making. Union identity, conceived in terms of strategic unionism, therefore played a particularly crucial role in *AR*'s conception of national identity. *AR* attempted to recreate Australian national identity in a European consensus mode, particularly drawing on the experience of Austria and Sweden.

Such a European focus was incompatible with the emerging view, supported and propagated by Paul Keating, of Australia as part of Asia. For Keating, "the questions of identity, image and our place in the world are linked" (1992: 5). Developing a new form of national identity was essential in order to restructure the Australian economy in the context of globalisation and to make it more internationally competitive. In

Keating's view, developing links with Asia, a key player in the globalised economy, was crucial (ALP, 1993: 4). [1]

Constructing Australia as a consensus society also meant constructing Australian identity almost exclusively in class terms. The report's general focus on unions and business is problematic in itself because it neglects issues of wider social reconstruction and the need to build broad-based social movement and community support for an alternative economic strategy (Jessop *et al.*, 1988: 30). However, it is even more problematic because *AR* seems to privilege a particular version of the working class, namely, the blue-collar male worker in manufacturing industry (Ranald, 1988; King, 1988). Indeed, *AR* is partly about reconstructing the conditions that produce a particular version of working class masculinity and Australian identity. This is not to deny that there are good reasons for emphasising the importance of the manufacturing sector (Bell, 1997: 227-229; Stewart, 1994: 46-47). Furthermore, some emphasis on manufacturing is totally understandable given the sector's vulnerability and history of job losses in the early eighties (Bell, 1997: 185). Nonetheless. the emphasis in *AR* is excessive and under-values other sectors of the economy such as the services sector, community sector and developing information markets. For *AR* even technological development is largely conceived in terms of developing manufacturing technology.

While the Keating government can be strongly criticised for not doing enough to assist manufacturing industry (Bell, 1997: 224-226), the government did, at least, have a broader conception of the economy, which incorporated the services and other sectors. For Keating, a reconstructed Australia involved a vision of a technologically advanced, internationally competitive economy where the growth of information markets would make cultural industries an increasingly important sector

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1   "Asia" has since become symbolic of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, the Republic and a range of other progressive issues under attack in the recent right-wing racist backlash. However, *AR's* focus on the European "consensus countries" of the seventies and eighties, while being excessively Eurocentric in the light of subsequent debates, also reminds us that links with Asia could potentially have much less progressive meanings if seen in terms of relations between business and labour.

of the economy. Australia would be a cosmopolitan society fully integrated into a global economy. An antipodean Sweden, Austria or Norway fitted nowhere in this model, not least because Keating's model was based on the belief that market forces, complemented by safety-net welfare and very limited industry assistance, could provide material security and a common interest for all sectors of society (Johnson, 1996). Keating's cooperative capitalism did have a role for unions to play. However, it was not a left-wing social democratic role but a right-wing social democratic role in which unions, for example, facilitate market forces through enterprise bargaining and other forms of labour market restructuring. It was a far more market-based conception of group and national identity than that propagated in *AR. AR's* nationalism was based on the belief that national governments could and should intervene to support national industry in a globalised economy and that good business and labour citizens would aid and abet that intervention.

Keating's conception also placed more emphasis on sectors of the economy in which women were employed, albeit often in casual and un-unionised work (Keating, 1993: 32: Johnson, 1996b). *AR* saw the need to encourage more women into manufacturing industry, and into union leadership (121, 193-4) but "fails to adequately analyse ... service areas of the economy, which are precisely where women mostly find paid employment" (Ranald, 1988: 11).

The Keating conception also emphasised that a wider range of social groups were to be involved in building a new, internationally competitive Australian economy. These included different racial and ethnic groups in addition to women (whom *AR* does mention). All social groups had a common interest in, and would benefit from, Australian economic reconstruction. Indeed, Keating attempted to influence the construction of market-based racial, ethnic, and gender identities in ways which fitted into the government's economic project so that, for example, Aboriginal culture was increasingly commodified, and non-English speaking background migrants were predominantly depicted as important human resources for Australia's export industries (Johnson, 1996; Tickner, 1995: 795; Keating, 1995b:1949-1950; Keating in *The Australian* 8-9 April, 1995). Although the Keating government can be criticised for its simplistic belief that its economic rationalist policies

served the common interests of all social groups (Johnson 1996a), its inclusive conception did explicitly incorporate wide sections of Australian society, and involved a broad vision of who constituted the working class.

Despite the influence of economic rationalism, at least unions and the working class were firmly included in the mainstream under Hawke and Keating. *AR* looks back to a time when unions could rightly expect that government saw them as part of mainstream Australian society. Under Howard, it is regularly implied that unions are just another divisive sectional interest working against the interests of the mainstream and individual Australians (Howard, 1995a: 4; Howard 1995c: 12-13: Howard, 1996b). The working class in general has been dissolved in much Howard rhetoric. There are 'battlers' who are mainly defined in electoral terms as the low income earners Howard claims Labor betrayed and whom he hoped would vote for the Liberals (Howard, 1995a: 19-20: Howard 1996a: 11). However, the battlers are not really part of a social group or class - they are the individual employees who will now be encouraged to negotiate workplace agreements without third party (i.e. union) interference (Reith, 1997). Howard's model of consensus, in so far as it exists, is definitely premised on agreement between individuals, not between peak bodies representing social groups. It is a model of personal and national identity that is based on the self- reliant individual of market liberalism.

For all its flaws, *AR* also contains much that is positive in the current context. It is not appropriate, in a piece focusing on *AR's* conception of national identity, to provide a detailed analysis of why the report failed to attract significant Labor government support. Nor is it appropriate to assess how successful *AR's* industry policies would have been if its recommendations had been accepted. However, it is worth noting that even the 'Keynesian' Curtin and Chifley Labor Governments tended to restrict the degree of government (never mind union) involvement in management decision-making in industry (Johnson, 1986). Moreover, Australian business has a long history of opposition to the limited interventionist policies that Labor governments have tried to introduce (Johnson 1989: 40-44, 77-84). Thus, the mission members seemed to be unduly optimistic regarding both the degree of social harmony that could

be achieved between various social groups and the likely reception of the Report by a Labor government. Indeed, *AR* would probably have been seen by many members of the Labor Government as a version of the "sentimental traditionalism" that Paul Kelly was to criticise so vehemently (Kelly 1994: ix). Nonetheless, the current Labor Party could usefully look at aspects of *AR* again as it attempts to develop its new industry policy in the light of Labor's devastating electoral defeat. However, let us hope that the right-wing backlash against various marginalised social groups doesn't tempt Labor to return to *AR's* narrow, labourist, view of Australian identity. Not only does that view neglect gender, ethnic and racial issues, and assume questionable common economic interests, but it is also a view of Australian workplace identity that may seem irrelevant to large sectors of the twenty-first century Australian workforce.

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