

The Language of Leadership: Prime Ministers as Political Institutions

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Discussion Paper No.90

September 2001

ISBN: 0 7315 3433 6

ISSN: 1030 2190

Abstract

This paper reviews leadership roles of the prime ministership, particularly the prominent public role as leader of a national government and advances three contentions. First, prime ministers see the institutional development of the prime ministership as a core part of the 'constitution-building' of the Australian system of democratic governance. Secondly, prime ministers see their most fundamental public role in terms of specific form of institution-building that can be called 'citizen-building'. Thirdly, the Australian governance system can cope with absences of prime ministerial leadership. This is due to the constitutional system of dispersed sources of leadership, originally intended to free the new nation from dependence on concentrated greatness.

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Introduction

It is enough if... (political leaders) can apply their experience to discern which of the many doctrines and projects that are seething up all around like bubbles in a boiling spring are most fit to be made the basis of wise legislation. Their function is to commend the best of these to the people, not waiting for demands, not seeming to be bent merely on pleasing the people, but appealing to reason and creating the sense that the nation is not a mere aggregate of classes, each seeking its own interests, but a great organized whole with a life rooted in the past and stretching on into the illimitable future. A democracy is tested by the leaders it chooses, and it prospers by the power of discernment which directs its choice.¹

The centenary of Federation provides a special opportunity to review the place of the prime ministership as an Australian political institution. Although the 100 year old national Constitution does not mention the office of prime minister, it has developed into the most prominent institutional feature of Australian politics. The prime ministership is now politically pre-eminent because the holder of the office is, or claims to be, leader of so many organised social groupings: initially the individual; then faction; party; parliament; ministers; cabinet; government; and culminating with nation. This chapter reviews leadership roles of the prime ministership, particularly the prominent public role as leader of a national government.

Leadership is a contentious topic and it is impossible in such an essay to avoid the contentious. Accordingly, I advance three contentions about the prime ministership as an institution of national political leadership in Australia. I have argument and evidence but neither is conclusive; this essay is designed to sketch the field and open up fresh research possibilities. Patrick Weller has done most to chart the external dimensions of the prime ministership and compare Australian developments with other parliamentary systems.² Graham Little has done most to map the internal curiosities of Australian prime ministers and demonstrate how leadership institutions depend on leading individuals.³

My aim here is to relate external and internal dimensions by illustrating the institution-building capacities of Australian prime ministers: externally, in terms of their contribution to the developing constitutional context; and internally, in terms of their personal contributions as public figures. My three contentions deal with Australian institution-building. The first is that prime ministers see the institutional development of the prime ministership as a core part of the 'constitution-building' of the Australian system of democratic governance. The second is that prime ministers see their most fundamental public role in terms of specific form of institution-building that I call 'citizen-building'. The third is that the Australian governance system can cope with absences of prime ministerial leadership. This is due to the constitutional system of dispersed sources of leadership, originally intended to free the new nation from dependence on concentrated greatness.

Speechcraft as part of statecraft

The Australian prime ministership is one of a number of institutional sources of political leadership operating within a specific national constitutional context. Over the century of Australian constitutional government, successive prime ministers have used the office of chief political executive to chart a policy course and to institute an evolving framework for national affairs. Just as importantly, in so doing they have contributed to the institutionalisation of the prime-ministerial office (see *Appendix* for further details). They have reshaped their own institutional office while ‘shaping the state’. But no measure of institutional growth can substitute for the personal authority of the leader. Ineffective leaders can be swamped by loyal their own bureaucracy; just as effective leaders can use their own word as a sword to overcome resource constraints. One of the most fundamental powers at the disposal of chief political executives is the power of political speech. I call this the *speechcraft* component of *statecraft*. This speechcraft component is the most obvious but also the least understood structure of the many powers at the disposal of prime ministers. Their leadership is in many ways tested by their ability to use the written and spoken word to mould community opinion around their preferred policy frameworks. This chapter investigates some of the ways that Australian prime ministers shape the state of public opinion and thereby lead the process of public deliberation, as theorists of deliberative democracy would conceive the political executive role.⁴

The ‘language of leadership’ in my title refers to the importance of the political language of public speech, originally oral and written but now mainly oral, used by prime ministers when ‘citizen-building’.⁵ The exercise of political leadership requires many instruments of power and influence. For heads of national government, their most fundamental form of leadership comes through what they say and what they want their community to hear. The ‘rhetoric of publicity’ is an essential part of the prime minister’s armoury in systems of parliamentary government; their ‘power to persuade’ is their most valuable *public* power.⁶

The social science literature on leadership is now vast and most of it deals with business rather than political executives. But a surprisingly high proportion of this literature deals with the importance of language in organisational leadership. Leaders exercise power over organisations in many ways, ranging from the secret and bluntly instrumental to the public and highly symbolic. Included in this range of powers is the power of language to shape the symbolic order of organisations. The use of language by business executives is in part directed externally to maintaining market confidence and, in part internally, to mobilising the commitment of subordinates. The importance of executives performing as ‘showmen’ through the use of ‘good stagecraft’ is a prominent theme in the leadership literature. Leadership works in large measure by ‘managing the meaning’ of collective effort. Organisational studies note ‘the theatrical elements of leadership’ which only rarely get the attention they deserve among political analysts. The close attention to ‘vision’ and ‘metaphor’ in studies of business executives illustrates the related attention to ‘the leaders’ story’, to the ‘leader as teacher’ and to the more general management of ‘the social architecture’ of organisations evident in the research of such authorities as Kets de Vries, Bennis, Gardner, Senge, Drath and Palus among others.⁷

Nothing that I have to say suggests that Australian political leaders are models of leadership or particularly skilled in speechcraft or statecraft. My case is limited to using a sample of prime ministers to help flesh out leadership. Prime ministerial leadership takes place in a

political setting where the ‘constitution of leadership’ conditions what leaders can and can not do. Leaders can themselves contribute to that constituting framework and at their best they develop fresh institutions to strengthen the basic governance capacity. The most necessary (but not by any means the most ambitious or necessarily important) policy responsibility of Australian leaders of national government is ‘citizen-building’: clarifying the rights and obligations of citizenship as the base of social capital for wider agendas of ‘nation-building’. This is an important aspect of the political ethics of Australian leadership, illustrating ethics at both ends of leader and followers.

Most political leaders fall short of leadership, and even great leaders stray from leadership. Their deeds frequently fail to match the high tone of their words. But the political system can cope with the routines of party politics. The Australian constitutional system of governance works better when political leadership is present, but we need not despair or search for wholesale institutional reforms if leadership is found wanting in the political executive. The system, like any sound organisation, can draw on plenty of other sources of political leadership while awaiting the return of energy and excellence in the chief political executive. This institutional network of ‘dispersed leadership’ is reassuringly compatible with many of the latest trends in leadership research, which have moved away from earlier reliance on models of heroic chief executives.⁸

Power and Persuasion

The centenary of Federation is throwing fresh light on the record of leadership exercised by our prime ministers, as evidenced by the recent publication of Michelle Grattan’s edited collection of essays, *Australian Prime Ministers*.⁹ This recent publication is itself suggestive evidence of the importance of the prime ministership as a central political institution. Drawing on this recent research, I have selected my samples of political leadership from three prime ministers who span the centenary of our Federation: Deakin, Menzies and Keating. I emphasise that these are *samples* rather than *examples* of leadership: my aim is to use these three case studies to throw new light on the function of leadership rather than to document the heights of Australian political leadership. This is not an evaluation of the performance of Australian political leaders, and my sample of three is not presented as a set of gold, silver and bronze leaderships awards. My analysis is limited to getting these three leaders to help us see leadership more clearly. Why these three? The answer in large part is because they were attracted to leadership, reflected on it and spoke and wrote about it. They might or might not have been great leaders in their own right; that is not my immediate concern on this occasion. All of us will have our favourite nominees for the finalists in the contest for the best Australian prime ministers, and I acknowledge that my approach leaves out such serious contenders as Barton, Hughes, Curtin, Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke, to name only a few likely candidates.

What is distinctive about my samples is that they were attracted to leadership and in particular to the concept of leadership. My focus, I repeat, is on the basic function of leadership and not the particular conduct of individual leaders. In their approaches to leadership, Deakin, Menzies and Keating share an intuitive grasp of the importance of speechcraft to statecraft. Each of them talked up leadership, presumably in the belief that they individually had whatever it takes to display leadership. I accept that one or more of them might have been mistaken about their own abilities, or blind to the gap between their lofty rhetoric and their lowly performance. For my purposes, what matters more is that these three samples provide

us with a base of important evidence about the place of leadership in Australian political and indeed social life. The greatest value of their evidence is that it conveys leadership as articulated by three very influential leaders of Australian politics.

This chapter lets these leaders themselves define, from the inside as it were, the elusive qualities of political leadership, so that we can better appreciate the distinctive role of this most prominent of Australian political institutions. Deakin is relevant as the exemplary founder, the shaper of Federation and the most constructive early prime minister who fought for what Paul Kelly has termed ‘The Australian Settlement’ or what Deakin himself termed ‘new protection’. Menzies refounded Deakin’s Liberal party in changed times, rediscovered ‘the forgotten people’, and taught Australians to think in terms of a new and different Commonwealth: the British Commonwealth of Nations, while emphasising the liberal principles of anti-Communism. Keating in turn reinterpreted the marriage of economy and identity of Australia (and the Australian Labor Party) in terms of economic restructuring, multiculturalism and the republic. Furthermore, during his pre-ministerial time as Treasurer close observers of the Hawke government noted that it was Keating ‘who’s the de facto prime minister’.¹⁰

All three prime ministers saw themselves as ambitious nation-builders. But more than this, all three reflected extensively on the role of political leadership, each in their own distinctive way. Deakin’s contribution can be seen most characteristically in his anonymous weekly contributions to the British press evaluating Australian politics, providing a fascinating public commentary on the value of Australia’s leading politicians, including remarkably pointed criticisms of his own leadership record. Menzies’s contribution emerges most obviously through his extensive speeches and written reflections on the art of politics, which provide readers with justifications of Menzies’ use of prime ministerial power. They are surely in part rationalisations and we have to make up our own minds on their credibility. Keating’s contribution comes through his unusually colourful public critiques of Australia’s lack of political leadership (which in the eyes of many critics only served to prove his point). Within the sample, Keating had the most to say about leadership, and it is an open question whether his apparently loose language (eg, the banana republic; the recession we had to have; Dr Mahathir’s recalcitrance; a beautiful set of numbers) undercuts or actually underscores his claim to leadership --- depending on whether the language is casually weak or calculatingly daring.¹¹ Keating’s rhetorical overreach illustrates an important larger issue: I do not hide the fact that each of these prime ministers was also a master-politician, more than capable of deploying their political skills in the service of self-advancement and the destruction of political opponents. Keating’s partisan rhetoric can be seen as a response to Menzies’ more polite but cavalier critique of earlier Labor leaders.

But before we review prime ministerial speechcraft we should spend a little more time justifying leadership and leadership rhetoric as legitimate objects of political analysis. Despite its preoccupation with leaders, Australian political analysis has a hard time with leadership. Getting the focus right might contribute substantially to getting the right picture of leadership, as a political practice but also as an object of political theory. The Australian scene illustrates larger issues of democratic politics and there is some reason to think that Australian political science might be in a position to contribute to wider international issues, such as how best to make sense of the leadership claims of democratic political leaders. Comparative political analysts since James Bryce have appreciated Australia’s advantages as a test-case for wider

international prospects in more effective democratic governance, and in Bryce's case for democratic leadership in particular.

Leading Questions

My topic is political leadership, and not simply political leaders. To use even grander language, my topic is the statecraft of leadership --- *if* that can be found and distinguished from the routine political craft that Hobbes, the original philosopher of power, called 'crooked wisdom'.¹² Not every political leader displays national leadership, just as not all or even the most decisive national leadership emanates from heads of government.

The institutional power of the office of chief minister can be explained in part by growth in its resource base and in part by the resourcefulness of successive prime ministers in wanting to make greatest use of the opportunities of office. The institutional leadership open to a prime minister builds on the bureaucratic base but depends in so many ways on the personal qualities of the occupant, and on what they understand as the reach of their responsibilities as leader of a national government. The institutional power of the prime ministership depends ultimately on the personal power of the prime minister, and that personal power is nowhere more evident than in the 'vision' driving the head of government's statecraft. Paradoxically, 'visions' can not be seen; they have to be described, so that this personal dimension of institutional power displays itself in the public speech of prime ministers.

The public rhetoric of the leader of the national government provides the *speechcraft* component of prime ministerial *statecraft*. The question asked here is: why is speechcraft such a core component of prime ministerial statecraft and how can we explain the contribution of speechcraft to the institutional power of this prominent national political office? Despite the silences of the constitution, Australian prime ministers have 'talked up' the importance of their own office. This public talk has helped institutionalise their public power, just as the power of the judiciary is greatly helped by judges' 'talking up' the value of an independent judiciary. This analogy should suggest some of the risk to public office of public officials' quest for legitimacy. I trace through the ways that political leaders' public speech can consolidate but also, if they overreach themselves, undermine their institutional power: just as it can with judges,¹³ leaders of the opposition, or for that matter leaders of minor parties in the Senate.

Australia is not unique when it comes to the power of public speech. The prominence of heads of government in contemporary democratic regimes is in part caused by the political need for prominent public speech. Leaders of government are performing important social functions: they are filling an old role as much as paving a new path. Edelman refers to the 'dramaturgy' of political leadership, with the suggestion that the public calls for a spectacle of leadership.¹⁴ This call for prominent public talk is especially relevant in regimes of representative government where popular consent is the basis for legitimacy. Speechcraft is at the heart of statecraft, for institutional leaders as much as political leaders. As a Canadian policy analyst puts it: 'The policy process in liberal-democratic states is locutionary --- it is about talk'.¹⁵ The 'prime minister as public educator' is another relevant Canadian suggestion.¹⁶ One practical application of this to the real world of leadership is the largely US literature on 'the rhetorical presidency' from which my account draws some of its inspiration.¹⁷

But not all talk by political leaders is politically effective. Just as some prime ministers have little to say, others have too much to say: conservatives tend to err on one side, Labor on the other. Examining the role of speechcraft in national statecraft helps identify the institutional limitations as well strengths of this most prominent political position. Not every function performed by every government leader can be examined here. Sampling is essential: first to select a manageable small set of examples of leading prime ministers; and then to focus on what they agree are the most necessary and essential of their leadership tasks. I draw directly on the experience and views of selected prime ministers who have been regarded as energetic leaders and who have publicly discussed the nature of their leadership role, thereby contributing to a national discussion over the role of leaders of government. The three in question (Deakin, Menzies and Keating) made substantial contributions to the development of the prime ministership as a core political institution. They strengthened the leadership capacity of the office of prime ministership, even though they knew full well that not every leader of government has the opportunity, competence, will or for that matter, the luck to exercise genuine political leadership.

The story that emerges is one of a constant preoccupation with one particular leadership role, which is the promotion of a sense of collective political identity through a national sense of citizenship. How can we explain this common thread? Federation inaugurated a new polity in a federated nation already committed to population growth through immigration. Given this background of support for immigration and federation, it is not really surprising to discover that heads of government tend to define their core leadership role in terms of ‘citizen-building’. Despite considerable party and policy variations in the wider agenda of ‘nation-building’, Australian prime ministers continue to justify their basic leadership responsibilities by reference to citizenship, just as they did in the early years after Federation. The conventional view is that Australian political leaders have organised their governments and policy frameworks by reference to the political economy of ‘nation-building’. This is true as far as it goes, but my contention is that leadership has anchored itself first and foremost in schemes of ‘citizen-building’, which emerges as the primary form of social capital required for each and every dream of national development.

Why take political leadership so seriously?

One of the paradoxes of power of the Australian prime-ministership is that this distinctive political institution is nowhere mentioned in the written Constitution being celebrated for its century of achievement. The effective power of the institution of the prime-ministership illustrates the ‘conventional’ nature of so many Australian political institutions and tells a larger tale about the function of norms or conventions of responsible parliamentary government. The written Constitution identifies the political executive with the Governor General, representing the Queen. The Constitution’s formal specification of executive power disguises the realities of who really leads our system of self-government. Not surprisingly, community opinion is confused about the executive responsibilities of the ‘dignified’ holder (the governor general) and the ‘effective’ holder (the prime minister). As the public debate over the 1999 republic referendum showed so clearly, the Australian voting community harbours extensive misunderstanding of the offices and roles associated with executive power.

Is the Australian prime minister a presidential figure or, as traditionally conveyed, part of a system of collective responsibility, the first among equals in a system of cabinet government? One helpful perspective on the Australian prime ministership is the UK literature on ‘the

British presidency'. Foley's work is representative of the thesis that the heads of government in parliamentary and presidential systems are converging, to the extent that both now deploy highly personalised and public forms of power.¹⁸ Regardless of the difference in constitutional settings, UK and US heads of government are more personal than collective in the ways that they conduct their public decision-making. So too, they are increasingly public in their appeals for support, in contrast to earlier times when appeals were made more directly to the parties in the elected political assembly.

Weller's collection investigating the relevance of this thesis to Australia included interesting if inconclusive studies of the 'presidentialisation' of Australian prime ministers.¹⁹ One firm conclusion that does indeed apply to Australia is Foley's recognition of the 'advent of a full-scale politics of leadership' focusing on the contenders for the top job of head of government. Foley calls this new political world 'leaderland' to acknowledge that 'leadership has now become an established political issue in its own right'. The job of the head of government is to 'lead the public' and leading the governing party is now an essential prerequisite for that larger task.²⁰

An important point to note in any Australian application of this UK 'presidency thesis' is that its advocates make no claims to a convergence of core institutions of state. Foley for instance is quite explicit: 'it is misleading to attribute the onset of presidential status to the enlargement of formal responsibilities and official structures'. The case can not be established by assembling data on bureaucratic rearrangements of executive power and resources, because we are dealing primarily with 'a qualitative change of form and interior substance'.²¹ What is growing is the personalised power of the leader of public opinion, upon which rests the legitimacy of the government as a whole. This 'precarious eminence' means that prime ministers both lead and follow public opinion and rely increasingly on their public persuasiveness as much as their policy competence.

But perhaps the topic of leadership itself is precarious? When investigating the political exercise of power we should be on guard against the temptation to think that because leading politicians think that they have great power at their disposal, it necessarily follows that their political conduct commands a powerful influence on public affairs. When it comes to punctuating the pretensions of the powerful, Francis Bacon as ever, gets to the heart of things: in this case with his retelling of the fable from Aesop of the proud but deluded fly perched on the axle at the chariot, looking behind at the dusty road travelled and declaiming: 'What a dust do I raise!'. In fact, the insect is simply being drawn along by larger forces, and it might well be that many leaders are in similar positions, where what they say is unrelated to the effects that they ask us to attribute to their proclaimed powers.

Frankly, the case is yet to be made that national policy performance during periods of leading prime ministers is decisively related to the power and influence of the serving prime minister. External forces might be much more decisive: hidden forces, social forces, international forces, or any number of more powerful determinants of policy capacity, such as the real power elites protected by such phrases as 'market forces'. For all we know, most prime ministers in most democracies might be little more than figure-heads, as much captives of fortune (or of fortune hunters) as they are masters of their national destinies. The Australian case against the claims of political leaders to rule has been made eloquently by Donald Horne and remains largely unanswered.²²

I acknowledge three notable limitations to my sampling of Australian political leadership. First, the personal speechcraft of chief political executives is only one part of their statecraft and national statecraft itself is a collective activity involving the might of the state. Heads of government have a role but they are not the only or even the most influential state actors. Second, the focus on the official position of government leader should not blind us to the existence of many other leadership positions close to the political executive. Positions of influence abound, speechwriters being just one delicate example.²³ Third, my sample is all-male. Although this is consistent with the historical practice of the Australian prime ministership, it would be very unwise to jump to hard and fast conclusions about the capacity of the office in the absence of evidence of how female political leaders might reshape the role. Australia has had valuable experience of female heads of government and a complete account of even so narrow a field as executive speechcraft would have to take account of that experience.²⁴

Theorising Political Leadership

To get some sense of perspective, it is useful to recover the reason behind the contemporary interest in political leadership. And there we find that one important reason for taking leadership seriously comes from Max Weber who, in providing one of the most scientific perspectives influencing modern social science, defined democratic politics precisely in terms of leadership.²⁵ This deserves our attention as a formative perspective on political leadership and on the place of speechcraft in statecraft. For Weber, the most typical form of political leadership in modern times is ‘charismatic’ leadership. This is associated with the personal power of those with ‘qualities of leadership’ of an extraordinary character --- someone believed to be in politics as a calling or vocation, as distinct from the attractions of vanity derived from being simply close to power.

For Weber, there is ‘a charismatic element in all leadership’. And this characteristic element finds an outlet in political speech. Weber recognised that politics ‘nowadays is predominately conducted in public and by means of the written or spoken word’.²⁶ The words that count are most generally those of the party leaders and most specifically those of the leader of the governing party. In liberal regimes of parliamentary government, the leading power is the governing party, and the leading individual is the chief minister of that governing party. In terms of political organisation, parliamentary government really means cabinet government, because the power of governing is held not by parliaments as a whole but by the governing party, from which the ministry is drawn. But in terms of who really rules, parliamentary government means in effect prime ministerial government. In Weber’s account, prime ministerial pre-eminence arose historically precisely because the leading party ‘needed a leader responsible for all decision to the public, and especially to the public in parliament, namely a head of cabinet’.²⁷ With the centre of political gravity moving from parliament to the party machine, the norms of parliamentary democracy give way to those of ‘plebiscitarian democracy’. This form of political order depends decisively on the very ‘personality’ of the party leader which becomes one of a party’s most valued assets. Most valued of all ‘a leader with a strong, demagogically effective personality’. Prime minister Gladstone is Weber’s model of the ‘plebiscitary dictator’, in large part because of the sustained popular belief in his ethical credentials, based in turn on ‘the power of demagogic speech’ deployed by Gladstone and his US presidential equivalent, Abraham Lincoln.²⁸

Typical of more recent orientations to political leadership is the pioneering ‘new institutionalism’ inspired by Philip Selznick. Contrast our preoccupation with the rather generic concept of ‘organisation’ with Selznick’s classic categories originally devised some 50 years ago in his book *Leadership in Administration*. Selznick asked us to compare the category of ‘the organisation’ with his preferred alternative and much more specific category of ‘the institution’. For Selznick, the focus on organisation was linked to preoccupations with sound management and efficiency: necessary but insufficient if we want to elevate our focus to the heights of leadership. The real difference between the ordinary thing called management and the extraordinary thing called leadership is that leadership is a form of what Selznick calls ‘statesmanship’.²⁹ In this view, among the responsibilities of leaders are ones of statecraft, and an essential component of statecraft is the capacity to ‘infuse with value’ the organised work completed under the leader’s supervision.

For Selznick, this statecraft dimension to leadership requires that those responsible for the organisation’s performance identify and justify the public value of the private work performed by the organisation, and transform organised internal effort into a publicly-valued institution.³⁰ An *institution* is a organisation that is consolidated through sustained public value, initiated and reinforced by those with leadership responsibilities. Many organisations can and do endure; but only well-led institutions have sustainability as publicly valued social assets. When thinking in *organisational* terms, we limit organisational leadership to techniques of managerial control exercised from on high. But when thinking in *institutional* terms, we open up our access to the qualities of statecraft discernible in many political executives.

Why take political rhetoric so seriously?

A valuable link between the general topic of statecraft and the specific topic of speechcraft is the long-acknowledged ‘power to persuade’ so basic to studies of political executives. Neustadt’s *Presidential Power* is the classic text now familiar because of its thesis that the core power of the US chief political executive is this power to persuade.³¹ To the extent that prime ministers are becoming more ‘presidential’, they are increasingly becoming public and not simply parliamentary persuaders. An inside glimpse into this world is provided by to Paul Keating’s former speechwriter, who contends that this development is not really all that new. Don Watson argues that the public role of executive persuasion is inherent in liberal-democratic politics and that ‘the speech will go on being politics’ principal unit of currency’.³² He argues that the principal reason for this is the fact that speeches require ‘some of the old-fashioned virtues of reason and evidence and logic’ which makes them vital tests of the deliberative capacity of a political system.

Not that all authorities agree with this view about the relevance of rhetoric. Consider the standard warnings against taking political rhetoric too seriously. Graham Little has conducted more research on Australian political leaders than any other political scientist and he warns against evaluating leaders’ performance solely by reference to their political rhetoric, which itself is part of their performance and not always intended to signpost their personal or policy interests. The ‘elevated rhetoric’ has to be read in light of ‘the sub-text’ which is a more reliable guide to character and political conduct. The analysis of political rhetoric is valuable, but mainly as an instrument of rule, revealing what the ruler thinks the ruled should think and not what the ruler really thinks. Political rhetoric illustrates the ruling style of political control

and can be taken seriously as a form of political activity, even an ethical activity, so long as we appreciate that it serves a function of political regulation rather than personal revelation.³³

One source of doubt is the suspicion that *speechcraft* is really only a clever form of *stagecraft*.³⁴ In this view, political actors are scripted, speaking lines either given to them by others who are the real authors of and authorities over political conduct or lines that the leaders themselves make up, not because they necessarily believe them but because they will play well with the public. Comparative analysts of political executives note the frequency with which political executives have ‘abandoned governance in favour of high approval ratings’, noting editorially that: ‘Ringmasters require a circus to ply their trade’.³⁵ But one useful warning here might be that long terms as political executives do not provide any hard evidence of real leadership. This is exactly the complaint made by Keating against Menzies (and Hawke for that matter) for ‘chasing cheers’.³⁶ that the warming talk about our place in the sun distracted Australia from the hard policy decisions that were allowed to slip away. In this view, Menzies was a follower rather than a leader, and for Keating letting others lead ‘is the antithesis of leadership...It’s a no-risk view, and you can’t be riskless as a leader’.³⁷

I have to acknowledge that political leaders resemble actors (remembering Keating’s proclaimed ability to ‘flick the switch to vaudeville’) and I acknowledge that my analysis of prime ministerial rhetoric might simply tell us what we have long known: that in political settings we get the leaders we deserve; and if we are really unlucky, all we get are ‘the offerings of the crook and the crank’.³⁸ At the outset of modern studies of political leadership, Weber also feared the arrival of the false leader who is little more ‘than an ephemeral narrow and vain upstart’.³⁹

Even when real leaders appear, they are only parts of a larger whole. However excellent the ‘speechcraft’ of chief political executives, it can never be more than a minor part of the state’s vast apparatus of political management. Even advocates of ‘discourse analysis’ tend to limit their attention to the discourse of political leaders, in the knowledge that the modern state regulates through myriad forms of ‘the official word’ supervised by political leaders but never really dominated by their public speech. The school of ‘governmentality’ rarely examines the rule exercised directly through the public speech of public leaders; and when the exceptional examinations do occur, they tend to be quite cautious and impressionistic.⁴⁰

Another sceptical approach would be to locate the place of leadership in theories of democratic elitism. This step gets us closer to analysing political rhetoric as a form of political regulation. A classic source is Schumpeter who acknowledges the ‘formative leadership of public opinion’ exercised by chief political executives.⁴¹ But more contemporary schools of elitism tend to treat political rhetoric as important primarily in terms of its effect in either maintaining or dismantling elite consensus. In this outlook, the stability of political regimes is more dependent on intra-elite consensus than on popular consensus as such. Political rhetoric reinforcing public support for a consensually unified elite is very valuable as a form of political leadership. But political rhetoric that threatens or weakens public support for political elites is more likely to be taken as evidence of destabilising populism rather than genuine leadership.⁴²

Finally in this list of precautions I note that if speechcraft is what is called for, we should acknowledge that chief political executives have no monopoly on this valuable skill. There is no law to suggest that they are either the best or the wisest when it comes to the exercise of

‘rule through rhetoric’. If political speech is the defining feature of statecraft, then recent Australian experience would suggest that a former prime minister like Malcolm Fraser has exercised greater political leadership since retiring from the office than when he held it; and that a serving Governor-general like Sir William Deane has exercised greater leadership than recent serving prime ministers.

But there is reason in rhetoric, right?

The social sciences display sustained interest in the analysis of the public speech of political leaders. Rhetoric has returned as an object of very serious scholarly inquiry.⁴³ For instance, US scholars of the presidency have discovered sub-specialities in ‘the sound of leadership’ which deals with political communications by heads of government.⁴⁴ Many other political scientists have conducted considerable research on the political rhetoric of political leaders.⁴⁵ Political anthropologists have contributed much to the analysis of political speech.⁴⁶ Political theorists have traditionally considered the links between political speech and political practice, with the best treating political speech as yet another form of practice.⁴⁷

The most sustained investigation of the persuasive power of political leaders derives from the ‘rhetorical presidency’ school which builds on Neustadt in trying to specify the forms and norms of rhetorical rule.⁴⁸ This orientation overlaps with the related interest in deliberative democracy, with considerable attention paid to the role of the chief political executive to exercise leadership when managing processes of community deliberation. Studies of the political assembly reveal the scope for the political executive to configure public deliberation around the assembly of elected representatives or alternatively around the electorate as auditors at large.⁴⁹

As in so many things, the ancients anticipated us. One of the most important of classical orientations to political speech comes from Plato’s puzzling and somewhat crazy dialogue *The Statesman*.⁵⁰ Not even Socrates stays the distance in this odd dialogue about statecraft. We can not ignore is Plato’s identification of political rhetoric as one of the ‘core competencies’ of statesmanship. We already know only too well that political leaders *talk* a lot. But we know all too well that they do not always *say* a lot. Indeed even then, they do not always mean what they say or say what they really mean. Yet Plato’s dialogue treats political rhetoric as somehow central to the function of political leadership.

What emerges from *The Statesman* is that political speech is one of the central forms of rule exercised by statesmen. For us, talk might be cheap but Plato has higher expectations. Talk is what the ruler does when ruling. Political rhetoric is thus an instrument of rule. It is as if Selznick had said that rhetoric is itself a form of administration, which when performed well consolidates the organisation and turns it into an institution. For Plato, the good use of political rhetoric is itself one of the defining features of an effective political leader. Rhetoric in this sense is more than simply a pretty decoration. To be sure, when used by leaders without real leadership it can be little more than bombast, the overdone embellishment of forgettable public speeches. So too, it can very cunningly disguise personal self-interest in the language of the public interest. But what we can take away from this ancient investigation of statecraft is that political rhetoric is a vital test-case of a leader’s claims to leadership.

Plato’s dialogue sorts through the ‘the art of ruling’ in part by analogy to the art of medicine: both are performed well when performed for the benefit of the receiver rather than the giver of the service. The ideal is the unconstrained discretion of service providers who really know

their craft, whether it be medicine or politics. But the analogy breaks down, as Plato knows that it must, when we acknowledge that the rule of law is in many respects preferable to the unfettered rule of the one best ruler.⁵¹ This emerges in this dialogue as an early contribution to the theory of the second-best, with the rule of law being a tolerable, indeed a welcome, alternative to the unattainable ideal of the rule by the all-wise but never available ideal statesman.

But even the administration of a 'rule of law' regime qualifies but does not altogether dispense with political speech as a vital component of the ruling function. Indeed, speech becomes all the more important when rulers have to comply with legislative processes and persuade suspicious legislators. The 'rule of law' regime highlighted in Plato's *Statesman* is far more practical than the dream world of the leadership of philosopher-kings pursued by some studies of political leadership.⁵² For many practical regimes, speech constructs the deliberative arena for collective public decision-making. Of course, speech is not all there is to politics: the political deliberation of rulers involves private as well as public speaking, and of course, decisive action as well as careful deliberation. But although public speech is only a part of political deliberation, it is the most visible part affecting the public life of a political community.⁵³ *Someone* has to convince the community of the need for laws in the first place; and *someone* has to persuade the community of the need for new laws; and *someone* has to apply general laws to particular circumstances and persuade those affected by the laws that they must comply with this interpretation of their duties of compliance. The community will need convincing if it is to give its consent to specific laws and to the law-making system generally.

Another way of saying this is that the root political problem is very similar to the core organisational problem: this emerges in *The Statesman* as the problem of how best to reconcile the need for *wisdom* with its equally valid need for *consent*.⁵⁴ (Weber saw things differently: for him, the core political problem is reconciling the 'disposition to obey' with the ruler's 'material resources' for effective rule).⁵⁵ Consent is just as important as wisdom if the supposed rule of wise executives is to be regarded as legitimate. Followers do not just happen: they have to be created, assembled in speech, and this verbal construction is the everyday job of a leader. The job of leadership is to balance the two requirements of wisdom and consent. Many leaders get the balance quite wrong: either by insisting on high-handed compliance with the wisdom of the executive or alternatively by currying popular favour and letting wisdom take care of itself.

Hancock's Setting: a Leaderless Australia?

Time now to turn the focus directly to Australian practices, hoping to see learn from Australian observers and political leaders about the prospects for real leadership within the framework of Australian democracy. We have been asked by Professor Castles to try to relate our contribution to Keith Hancock's *Australia*, an enduring classic of Australian studies written by the founding director of the ANU's research school of social sciences --- well after his early confession that 'Canberra is a document of Australian immaturity'.⁵⁶ The relationship between Hancock's orientation and that evident here is quite direct. Hancock wrote towards the close of the first third of the century of Federation and Deakin is his chosen example of the representative Australian political leader: representative of Australian public life at its best rather than at its most typical.

Noteworthy is Hancock's debt to James Bryce's various investigations of democracy in Australia, which stand out as exemplars of the application of comparative political analysis to the Australian scene.⁵⁷ Hancock observes that Bryce appreciated that Australian public life is generally dominated by material interests. One effect of this domination is the relative *richness* of Australia as an economy. Another is the relative *poverty* as a polity, and one indicator of this poverty is the mediocre quality of political leadership --- or to put it more positively the exceptional character of Deakin as an Australian type. Deakin represents the best case made for the power of the Commonwealth relative to the states. Deakin also represents the public policy achievements and 'all the positive policies of Australian nationalism'. The name for this policy orientation is the 'new protectionism' which came with its own distinctive ethic of providing Australian citizens with what is 'fair and reasonable', which Hancock identifies as 'the distinctive ethics of Australian democracy'.⁵⁸ A measure of Hancock's appreciation of Deakin's leadership quality is conveyed in his acknowledgement of Deakin's kinship with nationalist poets. For instance, Hancock reckons that Deakin shares with poet Bernard O'Dowd the distinction of being 'the most Australian voice' in the years of his involvement in Commonwealth politics. Deakin no less than the poet O'Dowd shaped the 'Australian creed' of the 'independent Australian Britons'. When thinking of Deakin's interest in nation-building, note also that Hancock said of O'Dowd that he understood that the function of art is to 'turn a mob into a people'.⁵⁹

And what of political leadership more generally as portrayed in Hancock's *Australia*? One of the distinctive aspects of Hancock's historical account of Australia is the remarkable absence of the standard fare of great heroes of the frontier.⁶⁰ There are two fascinating comments, meant I think to be compared, one in the context of the Labor party and the other in the context of 'the parties of resistance'. The importance of political parties for Australian public life is emphasised by Hancock: Australia is distinctive because 'the political parties have almost a monopoly in the manufacture of public opinion'. Hence, those who lead the major political parties exercise considerable influence over community sentiment. This is related to Hancock's fear that 'Australian idealism' has placed too much faith in political action, which itself is dominated by material rather ideal considerations.⁶¹

The first comment is that the Labor party is a marvellously disciplined machine for managing politics but this efficiency comes at a price: the cultivation of organisation produces 'orthodoxy at the expense of leadership': 'the very efficiency of the machine tends to kill enthusiasm'.⁶² Within the Labor party Hancock sees warfare among 'commonplace cliques competing for each other for the privilege of manipulating the machine'. Hancock's prediction was that 'this most characteristic movement of Australian democracy' might well produce a system of government which is, strictly speaking, 'unpopular'. Hancock's comments on the leadership defects of the conservative political parties are just as harsh. His target is the Nationalist party which is little more than a series of 'ever-changing pacts of covetousness'. This 'federation of divergent and sometimes conflicting interests' is singled out because it 'does not favour resolute and decided leadership'. Within conservative governments, leadership 'tends to dwindle into management, into the astute adjustment of differences', tending to favour those who hesitate and hang back awaiting their price before coming forward, just ahead of competing sections with equally sectional views.⁶³

The figure of R G Menzies also hovers at the edges of Hancock's *Australia*. Menzies came to fame as the advocate in the Engineers case of 1920, which features as the centre-piece of Hancock's analysis of the shifting balance of the Constitution.⁶⁴ Hancock very astutely

assesses the revolution in constitutional doctrine associated with the Engineers case. He notes particularly the shift from a federalist jurisprudence to a more nationalist or unified jurisprudence, effectively conferring greater power and responsibility on the national parliament and government, safeguarded by 'political expediency and public opinion' rather than judicial protection. Hancock's high hopes for state responsibility is reflected in his belief that state or 'provincial sentiment' is the natural home of Australian social democracy: 'State government is the instrument with which Australian democracy has fashioned its experimental socialism'. The primary role of the national government as originally understood was to 'guarantee the isolation' required for state experiments in social justice, through such policies as 'immigration restriction' and 'a second ring-fence of fiscal protection'.⁶⁵ This orientation helps clarify the real achievement of prime ministers like Deakin, Menzies and Keating in consolidating the power of the nation-state around the growing role of the head of the national government. I turn now to examine more closely my three contentions about the institutional character of this achievement in political leadership.

The Constitution of Leadership

My first contention is that organisational leadership takes place in a social or more correctly a political setting, in this case associated with the framework of self-government established by the Australian constitution. This constitutional setting is itself an expression of creative leadership of the Australian constitutional framers. There are important things we can learn about organisational leadership from the achievement of that founding generation.

My first contention holds that Australian political leadership has to be explained in terms of the leadership framework found in the constitution rather than simply in terms of the passing parade of political leaders Australia has enjoyed. What is this leadership framework? The term leadership is not mentioned in the Constitution. But neither is the prime ministership (ministers yes, but not the prime minister or cabinet), and that is my point. The constitutional setting for Australian self-government presumes that someone will inevitably have to hold office as head of government. What makes the office of prime ministership so fascinating is that its power rests on a mere convention or shared political understanding and not on any explicit constitutional provision. Yet from this convention or working assumption has grown the power and pre-eminence of our current system of prime ministerial, or as some would say, *presidential* government.

This rise in centralised political power would not take the framers totally by surprise. Many of the most influential constitutional framers were themselves experienced heads of government before Federation and some went on to be heads of the national government in the early years of the Commonwealth. Just think of Barton, Deakin, Reid, and even the colourful Billy Hughes --- not all of whom, I have to note, exercised leadership on a regular basis. But other framers went to be heads of other parts of the system of national governance. Just think in turn of the leading High Court justices like Griffith, O'Connor, Isaacs, and of H B Higgins as head of the Conciliation and Arbitration court. Think also of the many framers who went on to serve with distinction as members and senators who are only now coming to our attention in such works of rediscovery as the recently published *Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate*, itself a very welcome contribution to the centenary of Federation.⁶⁶

I mention all this to illustrate the diversity of leadership roles built in to the Constitution. The intention of the framers was to reshape the institutions of responsible parliamentary government to counterbalance the inevitable power of the chief executive (the prime minister and cabinet). The framers countered the inevitable power of the political executive with the far from inevitable power of countervailing forces available in such institutions as: federalism, with its vertical division of powers; the horizontal separation of powers between the political branches and the judiciary; the internal division of powers within the bicameral parliament; and so on. The system of governance provides for many leaders, but political leadership really comes about as the sum of the parts rather than the heroic work of any one part, party or party leader. This is what I mean by the 'constitution of leadership' which I suggest is a model for organisational leadership more generally.⁶⁷

Prime ministers are certainly not captives of this leadership framework. They can and must work within it but they can also contribute to its development. Each prime minister has built up the bureaucratic strength of the political executive. They have thereby contributed to the institutional development of the prime ministership. Sometimes this has simply augmented the power of the executive branch relative to the other constitutional branches; at other times, this development has reshaped the institutions of executive governance so that the Constitution as a whole has been strengthened. All political leaders surround themselves with the paraphernalia of power; what distinguishes leadership is that this power is institutionalised in publicly-valued organisations. At their best, these institutions live on after their sponsoring prime minister and contribute to the capacity-building of national governance, either in their own right or by sparking corrective institutional responses from other parts of the system of governance.

Let me give some examples of prime ministerial contribution to the development of the institutions of national governance. The clearest indication comes from the earliest contribution: Deakin's statecraft of constitutional construction, during the formative years of national governance. Deakin is the most reknown of the Australian constitutional framers and his responsibility for the writing of the Constitution stands as high as any one single framer: indeed, higher than almost all other framers. But that task of framing did not end with the completion of the constitutional conventions and the popular ratification of the constitution. During the term of the first national government, Deakin served as Attorney General, second in line after prime minister Barton, frequently acting as prime minister (eg six months in 1902).⁶⁸ Among his many contributions in that time before he formally succeeded Barton as prime minister, Deakin found pride of place in two pieces of legislation, both designed to fill out the constitutional framework and to get the system of national governance up and running. The first bill was that to establish the institution of the national public service through the Public Service Act of 1902; the second was the bill to establish the institution of the High Court through the Judiciary Act of 1903.

Deakin was not officially responsible for the public service legislation but he took charge during its parliamentary passage and promoted it through his ministerial leadership in parliamentary debate. He provided the public justification for a career public service that the minister officially responsible failed to deliver.⁶⁹ He described the public service organisation as modelled on contemporary business practice, with the public service commission's central staff acting as 'the business doctors of the public service', responsible for organisational improvement along sound business lines, but also 'the watchdogs of the public, the Parliament, and of the Minister'. Note the order: first the public, then the Parliament, then

finally the Minister. For Deakin, the organisation of national public service was a vital means of institutionalising responsible government.

Another means is represented by the institution of the High Court. Deakin saw the judiciary legislation as establishing 'the third co-ordinate power required by the Constitution' in union with the legislative and executive powers, but one uniquely capable of final determination of disputes over federal power and responsibility --- responsible in Deakin's words for 'unfolding the Constitution itself'.⁷⁰ The importance of the national judiciary is evident from Deakin's words that it is the 'organ of the national life which preserving the union is yet able from time to time to transfuse into it the fresh blood of the living present'.⁷¹ Thus Deakin displayed his leadership as a minister and legislator in constructing a third branch of government to balance the legislature and the political executive, all the better to promote the underlying cause of responsible government and the rule of law.

Can this perspective on the 'constitution of leadership' apply to later leaders like Menzies and Keating? Both helped 'grow the business' of executive government but did they cultivate constitutionalism in the spirit of Deakin? Inevitably, opinions will differ about the contrasting merits of conservative and Labor visions of constitutional governance. My focus here is limited to the institution-building capacities cultivated by Menzies and Keating, without extensive reference to their agendas of public policy and their social impacts. Both saw potential for better governance in the Australian constitutional order and both attempted to promote their contrasting visions of a responsible political executive in a system of parliamentary government. Both sought to reshape norms of political responsibility and allied institutional arrangements. Although neither employed anything like Deakin's founding rhetoric, both brought to the task their distinctive orientations to Australian constitutional development.

An early illustration of Menzies' orientation to the 'constitution of leadership' is his successful advocacy in the famous High Court case of 1920 --- the Engineers case, where the High Court held in favour of an expansive reading of the powers of the Commonwealth parliament. Like Menzies shared with Deakin the quality of being something of a known constitutional commodity when he arrived on the national scene. Like Deakin, Menzies was a lawyer who served initially as a member and then Attorney General in the Victorian state parliament. Both then turned to the national scene in order to use the greater power available centrally to promote their visions of nation-building. The constitutional cast of Menzies' leadership is reflected in his steady promotion of the powers and responsibilities of the national government. One important institutional development is his promotion of the policy capacity of the department of prime minister which grew into its contemporary shape under his stewardship.

This growth in central bureaucratic capacity is characteristic of Menzies' cultivation of new national institutions from existing weaker bureaucratic organisations. Menzies' overhaul of cabinet procedures and operations began when he first assumed office as prime minister in 1939. He cultivated the Defence secretary, F G Shedden, as the core of a new central bureaucracy. Menzies' later term from 1949 saw the rise to prominence of Allan Brown and then Bunting as cabinet secretaries with growing responsibility for the public service generally. Menzies preserved the senior public servants employed by the outgoing Chifley government and promoted an ethos of public service professionalism that he associated with the Westminster system.⁷² Menzies supervised the pursuit of regularity by cabinet officials:

he approved the initial 1949 departmental statement on cabinet procedures and its consolidated version circulated as a cabinet handbook in 1950.⁷³

Menzies' conduct of cabinet attracted similar claims of adherence to Westminster conventions and indeed to British institutions more generally. Claiming to be no more than 'first among equals', Menzies justified his relaxed style of cabinet management as more consistent with his preference for the role of *expositor* over the alternative role of *chief executive* that he associated with presidential systems. The ethos of collective ministerial responsibility was the reigning norm, with Menzies' leadership being located within an institutional framework that grows out of the constitution without ever being precisely written into the constitution. So too Menzies' reputation as a parliamentarian is rightly based on his strong support for the 'forms of the House' as institutions of significance which regulate the political contest between a strong government and an equally cohesive and responsible opposition. Having served as opposition leader, Menzies appreciated that this non-government office was also a leadership position of significance to national governance.⁷⁴

In contrast to Deakin and Menzies, Keating's orientation to the constitutional construction of leadership seems to lack history and precedent. The pupil of Jack Lang does not stand out as a constitutionalist. But consider the significance of the fact that Keating's first taste of ministerial office came just weeks before the dismissal of 1975. The constitutional aspect of Keating's reframing of political leadership evolved from the partisan resentments of 1975 (against the Senate as much as the Governor General) to the much more fundamental project for an Australian republic, and in particular the project for an Australian head of state.

Once prime minister, Keating drove the republic debate, even when he appeared to have delegated the details to others. The establishment of the Republic Advisory Committee, its Report and the eventual movement for a referendum before century's end are all illustrations of Keating's understandable attempt to recast the constitution of political leadership in terms of a refashioned Australian national identity. The option for a minimalist republic was to prove unpopular but this is not to deny Keating's leadership in making the republic an opportunity to rethink constitutional conventions. Even the minimalist model rests on a quite substantial overhaul of the concepts of political sovereignty in the 1901 Constitution --- in effect, substituting the national sovereignty of Australian citizens in place of the foreign Sovereign.⁷⁵

The reach of Keating's ambition is reflected in the comment from his speechwriter Don Watson that Keating's public policies were 'designed to give the country a soul'.⁷⁶ In his first Australia Day address as prime minister, Keating stated that 'we must re-make Australia'.⁷⁷ At its best, this identity remake brought racial reconciliation forward as a national priority and placed multiculturalism within the mainstream policy priorities. Keating understood that his job as head of government was to promote 'the cultural shift, the shift in attitudes'. This was believed to take Australia into a new realm as 'competitive, outward looking, phobia free'.⁷⁸ This was no to be, in part because of Keating's rhetorical overreach fueled by his quest for displaying leadership, with himself as a model of the remade citizen. This overreach has much to teach us about the limits of leadership, particularly leadership conceived in Keating's bold and dramatic terms of 'not so much in rethinking the state as in redefining the nation'.⁷⁹

The Centrality of Citizen-Building

Contention two deals with the ethics of responsibility held by prime ministers. My interest is in the public ethics attached to the institution of the prime ministership rather than the personal ethics of individual politicians. My evidence suggests that the area of official responsibility most valued by the leaders themselves relates to the ethics of citizenship. More specifically, it relates to their capacity to shape and modify civic conduct by clarifying the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. In this way, leaders take a leading responsibility for 'civics writ-large', as an essential component of the good polity. Thus, the institution of citizenship ('citizen-building' in its individual and corporate capacities) emerges as the underlying focus of prime ministers when they justify the deepest political design of their leadership strategies. While their policies for 'nation-building' might be justified in terms of social and economic benefits, their right to their post of leadership tends to be justified in terms of the political benefits of revitalised citizenship.

Before presenting some examples, I remind you of my third contention, which is that leadership is not everything --- many prime ministers rarely deviate from the lower routines of legal and economic management. Even the great political leaders are far from consistent, even far from ethically consistent, in their promotion of charters of civic conduct. The peaks of ethics get shrouded in the clouds of everyday politics, so that in many, perhaps most, instances, organised politics crowd out institutionalised leadership. Sad but true as this is, we should not despair. I contend that the institutionalised 'norms of fair play' found in the constitutional system (ie, its procedural checks and balances regulating public decision-making) will usually prevent too much damage from the recurrence of this default position. But it would be imprudent to expect too much of ethical leadership. The examples that I give are admirable precisely because they are the rare exceptions. The grain of political conduct runs along the line of least resistance to political self-interest. Again, prudence suggests that we learn to live with that, provided that our political leaders play their part in national affairs within their allotted constitutional setting, and that we keep that setting well-maintained with adequate systems of checks and balances against unethical conduct.

Deakin's understanding of his ethical responsibilities of office can be seen in the establishment of the package of policy and legislation associated with New Protection. This legislative and policy package is something of an early form of what we now call 'mutual obligation'. The difference is that Deakin's original version extracted obligations from business in return for industry protection against foreign competition. The chief obligation extracted from business was that of compensating employees with 'fair and reasonable' terms and conditions of employment. Thus it dealt with individual and corporate citizenship. This package is still seen favourably by historians as 'a particular kind of nation-building social solidarity that would promote both equity and efficiency'.⁸⁰ Deakin's New Protection package was long understood as anchoring 'the distinctive ethics of Australian democracy', to use W K Hancock's description in his classic book *Australia*.⁸¹ This was until it began to be dismantled under the fervour of micro-economic reform so celebrated by prime minister Keating, itself modelled on a new charter of citizenship dealing with the virtues of competing as Australians in a worldwide marketplace.

Menzies' understanding of the ethics of leadership can be identified with his promotion of the rights of *The Forgotten People* (a book based on Menzies' radio broadcasts) when in opposition on the eve of his re-founding of Deakin's Liberal party.⁸² The forgotten people are

the middle class or mainstream who have been neglected by Labor. Menzies' cultivation of the middle class is an aspect of his nation-building, where the civic rights of this neglected class are protected and promoted. Like Deakin, Menzies' orientation to nation-building reflects his own belief that he was 'called' to politics as a public service, which helps explain his gift of and commitment to public speaking, including radio speeches.⁸³ Illustrations from Menzies' later period in office include his promotion of the national capital as a living symbol of political nationality, his decision to take responsibility for a national system of tertiary educational institutions, and his successful accord on the vexed policy issue of state aid to non-governmental schools. What unites these issues is Menzies' understanding that Australian citizens deserve, as a matter of right, an worthy national capital, an equitable national system of universities, and equitable access to well-resourced schools. Each of these policy developments greatly expanded the scope of Commonwealth reach and regulation, and thereby fed back into another typical Menzies' preoccupation, the development of a professionally competent public service.⁸⁴

Keating's understanding of the ethics of leadership is explicitly related to his promotion of a new national identity, a multicultural orientation of an Australia that accepts its location in Asia, a new version of the Australian national story, a new interest in civics within schooling, and a revised charter of citizenship with fresh recognition of the rights of indigenous Australians. Laid out in this form of a long list gives one indication that perhaps we have here a case of ethical overreach. Is it really possible that a political leader can persuade citizens to this extensively reframed sense of citizenship? Keating's first year in prime ministerial office was 1992 and in that one year he devoted himself to raising the profile of Australian history and national identity with many speeches celebrating national turning points. Clearly he understood that he too was participating in, indeed shaping, another such turning point.

Keating's observers have noted his enlistment of the historian Don Watson to help craft the right words to promote Keating's instinctive appreciation of Australian citizenship in terms of membership in a sovereign and independent nation. Think of this strategy as involving three components. Part of this reshaped national story involved a rewriting of the British Commonwealth version left behind by Menzies; another part dealt with the significance of immigration and multiculturalism to 'retooling' Australia to compete on the world stage; and another part dealt with reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, beginning with the famous Redfern Speech with its apologetic list of regrets. The 'productive diversity agenda' covered the whole sweep of multiculturalism and sought to justify this to an increasingly suspicious public through 'a productivity dividend' of community prosperity. The merits of the policy were undercut by the weaknesses of the national economy and the invisibility to many voters of the proclaimed dividend.⁸⁵

The public service became a pacesetter of what was known as 'productive diversity', a kind of model for the emerging new society that Keating strove so forcefully to sell to a reluctant people. The backlash that came and unseated Labor from government was a classic illustration of the failure of 'wisdom' to find its companion 'consent', and highlights the limits of Keating's fondness for 'big picture' rhetorical productions. While Keating may be right that 'in the end it's the big picture which changes nations', it is also true that big pictures hang heavy in the popular mind, and risk falling when that mind grows weary or suspicious of the merits of what is being asked to support. Even sympathetic critics call this the 'crisis inflation' that Keating just had to have, eventually to his own political cost.⁸⁶

Leadership is not everything

My third contention is the one about organised politics crowding out institutionalised leadership. Surprisingly, this condition does not require unethical leaders. Even good people can get caught up in public office in such ways that leadership never really emerges, but not because of any personal ethical failing of leaders. There are many political leaders who are personally correct but far from admirable as public persons. The office or role is just too big for them. But let's keep this lapse in perspective: the system can cope with lack-lustre characters.

My third contention balances my earlier hopefulness by moderating our expectation that all or even most political leaders can or will exercise genuine leadership. The same historical record can be mined for equally valuable material highlighting the persistent gap between leaders and leadership. Most prime ministers most of the time hold office as national political leaders but demonstrate little national leadership. I want to give some illustrations of these routine preoccupations with partisan interests to show that genuine political leadership runs against the grain of politics. Our constitutional systems, however, can contain useful public values (such as accountability and oversight) to keep alive the spirit of self-government during those times when political leaders lack personal commitment to public ethics. To some extent, institutions can get us through when admirable personal qualities are missing from our political elite.

Much of the leadership literature rests on a political preference for strong government and the institutional supremacy of the executive branch. My countervailing orientation is towards legislative supremacy, but even this commitment to accountable government is only incompletely democratic compared to views supporting the supremacy of the people themselves. The case for dispersed leadership begins with doubts about the adequacy of executive supremacy and can then be taken as far as democratic commitments might warrant.⁸⁷ Democratic regimes vary greatly according to the degree of separation of legislative and executive power. The concentration of both powers in the hands of parliamentary executives flatters the leadership pretensions of heads of governments; just as formally separated powers invite chief executives to consider themselves singled out for greatness. Both types of democratic regime benefit from the checks and balances of dispersed leadership.

In the Australian case, the constitutional system contains other locations of leadership that are no less important than that potentially available through the chief political executive: for example, chief ministers do what they do in part because of the scrutiny exercised by their opposite number in the leader of the opposition which is a high public office that grows naturally out of institutional logic of the parliamentary system. So too the Senate provides plenty of opportunities for leadership to exercise itself when responding to executive initiatives or when stealing the initiative itself. Then there is the High Court where leadership is certainly no confined to the position of chief justice. And so on, across the system of constitutional government, including within the political parties which are vital public institutions that do so much to cultivate the leadership capacities of politicians.⁸⁸ The Australian constitutional system of governance provides many useful checks and balances against the worst excesses of executive self-interest. These mechanisms might offer useful lessons for corporate governance more generally, if we want to take seriously my concept of the 'constitution of leadership'.

An example of 'politics as normal' from Deakin is the establish of the basic norm of two-party government. This came about through the so-called fusion of the non-Labor parties in 1909, at Deakin's insistence during his final term as prime minister. Of course, every institutional norm illustrates some type of ethical orientation and I do not want to suggest that Australia's long tradition of stable two-party government is unethical. Rather, my claim is that Deakin engineered this system through his adept political scheming against his rival political groupings --- the Reid-led free traders on the right, and the third force of the Labor party on the left. Deakin in 1904 quite deliberately stepped back to allow the Labor party to take office, knowing that this was the most effective way of driving home to Labor that they could not effectively govern without Deakin's support. The Labor government fell within months. The lesson Deakin wanted to drive home was that the preferred strategy was for Labor to come in as the junior partner to a Deakin government. Deakin provided similar medicine to the anti-Labor conservative forces: early in 1905 he led his party out of the loose coalition with Prime Minister Reid's short-lived government (which had replaced the collapsed Labor government), earning Reid's undying enmity of Deakin as a political spoiler. Deakin formed a government to replace that of Reid, so that both right and left and good reasons to see Deakin as their spoiler. Despite this, both reconciled themselves later to Deakin's establishment of the more or less permanent two-party system after the fusion of 1909.⁸⁹

Menzies and Keating are equally 'guilty' of being party politicians. Typical of Menzies' style of political management were his use of the fear of communism to tarnish Labor's reputation and that of its leaders, his countervailing promotion of Queen and empire as central to Australian national interests, his intransigent opposition to Senate obstruction of government programs, his refusal to allow public officials from Defence to appear before Senate committees investigating government performance, his use of the 1951 double dissolution to realign the powers of House and Senate, his establishment of the position of Leader of the House to bring greater programmatic precision to the business of the lower house, and his refusal to allow Parliament to debate or take up the reports of the parliamentary inquiry into constitutional reform that he helped establish.⁹⁰

Keating's partisanship is legendary and needs no extended documentation here. What might be noted is his sustained interest in justifying his political profile in terms of his exceptional leadership, as for instance his identification of himself as the Placido Domingo of Australian politics. This was not meant as a suggestion that he was simply a great performer of works written and directed by others, although such an interpretation plays into the hands of those who are critical of politicians as actors. Keating meant this reference to qualify the impression the public had of his high-handedness, as when dismissing Question Time as no more than a courtesy extended by the political executive to Parliament, or when rostering his Question Time appearances to two a week, or when refusing to allow his ministers to 'slum it' before Senate committees, or when blasting the Senate as 'unrepresentative swill', or when praising his faithful supporters as 'the true believers' in his cause and capacity.⁹¹

The Keating example is the best Australian illustration of the 'parliamentary presidency' thesis discussed earlier. Keating made leadership the major plank of his policy. I am suggesting in this section that that leadership is not everything. Keating differs, claiming that leadership is everything. I suspect that this repeated claim helped his opponent John Howard get the record parliamentary majority at the 1996 elections. Howard's modesty might well be deserved; but no more so that the fate that befell Keating's immodesty. The infamous Placido Domingo address promoted the view that 'politics is about leading people'. Keating indulged

his leadership-envy of the United States, downgrading even great Labor leaders like Curtin as at best ‘a trier’. For Keating, leadership ‘will always be about having a conversation with the public’, not in the sense of ‘being popular’ or being accessible, ‘tripping over TV crews’ cords’: rather it is ‘about being right and about being strong’.⁹² Conversations are two-way activities involving responsible listening as well as taking the lead in talking. Being a strong listener is a rare quality among political leaders, but at least Keating can know that he helped the community recover the importance of this lost art.

Conclusion

Drawing on the experience of my sample, I have advanced three contentions about the practice of Australian political leadership. The first contention is about the basic ‘constitution of leadership’ and the norms of the basic institutional setting in which Australian political leadership is practised. Leaders work within a leadership system and I contend that this system limits and qualifies the leadership capacities of even the most ‘prime’ of prime ministers. The ‘constitution of leadership’ limits the greatness that can be contributed by great prime ministers, but also protects the community against the weakness of the weakest prime ministers.

The second contention is about the ethical responsibilities of leadership. My interest here is in the institutional responsibilities accepted by prime ministers, ie, what they understand as their duties of the office or role, as distinct from their sense of personal responsibility or their personal ethics. I am dealing with public rather than personal ethics. Here I make another contention about the importance of institutions: the evidence here suggest that prime ministers understand that among the most responsible of their public duties is the development of a community sense of national citizenship. Citizenship is the status we share in common as equal members of a sovereign people. Citizenship is the shared civic orientation which defines our core political identity; citizenship is based on political values appropriate to national identity, such as legal equality, equal access to public services and, in Australia from a period after Deakin, equal obligations to participate in the duties of franchise.

Citizenship is ethical in character because it defines our civic ethos or shared way of life based on core rights and obligations. These leading prime ministers understand that they have a public duty to shape the civic outlook by clarifying the entitlements and duties that we owe one another in our role or office as citizens. Prime ministers, of course, claim much more for their charter of responsibilities, with these three describing their wider reach of polity responsibilities in terms of ‘nation-building’. But the aspect that is most closely aligned with the speechcraft within their statecraft deals with the cultivation of citizenship: with clarifying the development of the rights and responsibilities of citizens.

The third contention is about the safeguards against unethical leadership when the default position recurs, ie, when ‘organised’ politics gets in the way of ‘institutional’ leadership. This is the normal situation, where norm refers to the conventional norms of political management, typically involving partisan antagonism and institutional conflict. These standard operating procedures do not depend on ethical leadership but nor do they necessarily destroy it. I contend that the political system does not presume that each and every prime minister will exercise leadership in their approach to public ethics. In some cases this might be because they lack these skills of political leadership, with the speechcraft only a minor element of their statecraft as, for instance, in what Graham Little refers to as Hawke’s ‘speechless

government'.⁹³ In other cases, their statecraft itself is of low quality; and in still other cases, their personal qualities are low. But the good news is that the system is designed to work tolerably well with the ethical commonplace as much as with ethical excellence.

These three contentions derive from the Australian political scene, but they raise interesting questions about leadership practices and prospects in democratic regimes generally.⁹⁴ This essay will have served its purpose if Australian practices have emerged as richer examples of the puzzling institutions of political leadership. Hancock and before him James Bryce would not have been surprised at our contemporary search for Australia's place in the wider world of democratic possibilities. Political leadership in democratic regimes is *diversified* leadership, drawing as much on the strengths of civil society as state institutions. The model of 'the great helmsman' does not fit democratic regimes. Bryce appreciated that the ruling or leadership class in monarchy or oligarchy is easily located but that 'one must in a democracy go further afield and regard not only ministers and legislators but also the men (sic) who are most listened to by the citizens, public speakers, journalists, writers of books and pamphlets, every one in fact who counts for something in the formation of public opinion'.⁹⁵

Appendix: Bureaucratic Profile

Hancock wrote before the rise of bureaucratic resources and pre-eminent power of the prime ministership. Deakin served as prime ministership but began his tenure officially as minister for external affairs, and served out his last term as minister without specific portfolio. His official secretary, M L Shepherd, ran a 'prime minister's office' within the department of external affairs. Shepherd became the first secretary when the department of prime minister was established under the Fisher government in 1911.⁹⁶ This Commonwealth move followed similar moves by state governments to establish separate departments for the head of government. A cabinet office was established within this department by the time the Commonwealth government settled in Canberra in 1927. This cabinet secretariat had little or no policy input and dealt primarily with the paper chase.⁹⁷ The slow growth of central bureaucracy under the direction of the prime minister was largely uneventful, with the possible exception of the assumption of responsibility for the organisation of regular premiers' conference from 1929. The new central agency had resumed control over external affairs during the first world war, and retained this control until the re-establishment of a separate external affairs department in 1935.⁹⁸

Menzies' first term as prime minister saw important initiatives when the departmental secretary was formally admitted to cabinet meetings, thereby establishing an official cabinet secretary. The later war cabinet was managed by the secretary of the Defence department whose performance convinced Menzies of the importance of greater secretarial administration of cabinet business. The dramatic rise of prime ministerial bureaucracy began under Curtin and Chifley later during the second world war. Curtin but especially Chifley drew heavily on Treasury and the Department of Post-War Reconstruction to buttress the bureaucratic capacity available to the prime minister. The Chifley government hived off the 'brains trust' from Post-War Reconstruction and turned it into an economic policy division within the Department of Prime Minister, to provide a balance to the total reliance on Treasury advice and analysis. When former head of Post-War Reconstruction Allan Brown took over as head of Prime Minister's Department in 1949, he arranged for the transfer of the new economic policy division and established the modern origins of a central agency with capacity for its emerging role in policy co-ordination. Some 50 officers came across from Post-War Reconstruction (including three future heads of prime minister's: Bunting, Hewitt and Yeend) to boost the staffing level of Prime Minister's to around 150, and the quality of personnel even more greatly.⁹⁹

After the 1949 election, Menzies held only the central portfolio of prime minister. This now proved sufficient for ambitious heads of government intent on providing central control over law and policy. The bureaucratic aim of 'the 1949 vision' of the reformers of central power was to provide the prime minister and through him cabinet with independent analysis of a level to check and balance the undoubted expertise of Treasury. The cabinet secretary, what Crisp called 'this awesome post of power and influence', soon became the effective head of the public service, with such traditional rivals as the public service commissioners re-organised as subordinate bureaucratic chiefs within the central portfolio of Prime Minister's.

Menzies further refined his power base by adopting an inner cabinet from 1956. This has since been the normal mode of cabinet government, apart from the Whitlam governments' large cabinet of 27 members.¹⁰¹ This development in cabinet organisation also saw the department's initiation of a cabinet handbook prepared first under Brown. This exemplifies the ability of a prime minister to use the bureaucratic power of the public service to set appropriate norms for ministerial conduct, and so to institutionalise political conduct.¹⁰² Menzies also established an office of education within his department to guide Commonwealth policy with respect to universities and financial assistance to private schools. Also derived from Menzies' reorganisation of his department was the location in it of the beginnings of the CSIRO, the Australia Council and of a federal bureau for Indigenous affairs.¹⁰³ The formal re-organisation into a Department of 'Prime Minister and Cabinet' dates from the McMahon government, when the policy advising and cabinet offices were reunited into a powerful new whole.¹⁰⁴

What is distinctive about the Australian situation is the existence of a department of state responsible for central policy co-ordination with close working relations with political staff responsible for co-ordinating the political process generally. The cabinet office traditionally resides within the public service department but under the Howard government has been relocated within the prime minister's personal office and managed by political rather than public service staff. This unfolding of the new institutional influence of political staff is noteworthy but it falls outside the sample under study here. From the time of the Whitlam government, the private office of the prime minister has grown from strength to strength, providing heads of government with an effective policy priorities review mechanism that is particularly sensitive to the party-political implications of policy. This development of a non-career partisan bureaucracy loyal to the head of government is a classic illustration of the rise of centralised and highly personalised power around chief political executives in all Westminster-derived systems.

Analysts use the term 'deinstitutionalisation' to describe this shift from civil to personal service at the centre of the political executive. The advantage of this term is that it suggests that the bureaucratic structures matter less than does the personal political design of the chief political executive. It also suggests that the formal architecture of government organisation is capable of being bypassed by less formal contracts between the political leader and the people, in their capacity as 'followers' of the head of government. This is precisely the picture that is conveyed by much of the best recent research on political leadership.¹⁰⁵

ENDNOTES

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³ See eg Graham Little, *Political Ensembles: a psychosocial approach to politics and leadership*. Oxford University Press 1985; *Strong Leadership*. Oxford University Press 1988; 'The Two Narcissisms: Comparing Hawke and Keating' and 'Malcolm Fraser', chapters 2 and 4 in Judith Brett ed *Political Lives*. Allen and Unwin, 1997. Compare Manfred Kets de Vries, *Leaders, Fools and Impostors: Essays on the psychology of leadership*. Jossey-Bass 1993.

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- ⁵ See also Charles Handy, 'The Language of Leadership', chapter 19 in W E Rosenbach and R L Taylor eds *Contemporary Issues in Leadership*. Westview Press 1989, 235-41.
- ⁶ Patrick Weller, *First Among Equals: prime ministers in westminster systems*. Allen and Unwin, 1985, 11, 181.
- ⁷ See eg John van Maurik, *Writers on Leadership*. Penguin 2001, 56-7, 100, 105, 117, 136, 198, 208, 210-12, 219-20. See generally Alan Bryman, 'Leadership in Organizations', chapter 2.2 in S R Clegg, C Hardy and W Norf eds *Handbook of Organization Studies*. Sage 1996, 275-92; C Hardy and S Clegg, 'Some Dare Call it Power' chapter 3.7 in S R Clegg, C Hardy and W Norf eds *Handbook of Organization Studies*. Sage 1996, 630-1.
- ⁸ See eg Alan Bryman, 'Leadership in Organizations', op cit, 283-4. See also John Adair, *Great Leaders*. Talbot Adair Press, 1989, 57-72.
- ⁹ Michelle Grattan ed *Australian Prime Ministers*. Sydney: New Holland, 2000. See also Patrick Weller ed *Menzies to Keating: The Development of the Australian Prime Ministership*. Melbourne University Press 1992. See the comparative schema in E C Hargrove, 'Popular Leadership in the Anglo-American Democracies', chapter 7 in Edinger ed *Political Leadership in Industrialized Societies*, op cit, 182-219.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in C Campbell and J Halligan, *Political Leadership in an Age of Constraint*. Allen and Unwin, 1992, 24; see also 224-8, 231-7. See also C Campbell, *The US Presidency in Crisis: A Comparative Perspective*. OUP 1998, 203-212.
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- ¹² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed C B Macpherson. Penguin 1968, Chapter 8, 138
- ¹³ Consider particularly Haig Patapan, *Judging Democracy*. Cambridge University Press 2000.
- ¹⁴ M Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. University of Chicago Press 1988, 37-40; and 'Language' in *The Politics of Misinformation*. Cambridge University Press 2001, 78-103. See also B Miroff, 'The Presidency and the Public: Leadership as Spectacle', chapter 11 in M Nelson ed *The Presidency and the Political System*. CQ Press 1998, 299-322; Tucker, *Politics as Leadership*, op cit, 31-35.
- ¹⁵ L A Pal, 'Hands at the Helm?', chapter 2 in L A Pal and D Taras eds *Prime Ministers and Premiers*. Prentice Hall Canada, 1987, 24. See also Adair, *Great Leaders* op cit, 73-122.
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- ¹⁷ Consider J D Barber, 'Adult Identity and Presidential Style: The Rhetorical Emphasis', in D A Rustow ed *Philosophers and Kings: Studies in Leadership*. New York 1970, 367-97; J K Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*. Princeton University Press 1987; and Robert Eden, *Political Leadership and Nihilism*. University Presses of Florida, 1983, 15, 25, 223.
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³⁶ Quoted in G Little, 'The two narcissisms', chapter 2 in J Brett ed *Political Lives*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1997, 17.

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³⁹ Weber, op cit, 312.

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- ⁵⁸ Hancock, *Australia*, 64-6, 93, 193, 223, 244.
- ⁵⁹ Hancock, *Australia*, 51, 257, 271.
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- ⁶² Hancock, *Australia*, 180.
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- ⁷⁷ Paul Keating, 'Australia Day Address 1992', *Major Speeches of the First Year*. Canberra 1993, 4. Compare 'interpretive leadership' in Alford, *Group Psychology and Political Theory*, op cit, 180-3.
- ⁷⁸ Paul Keating, *Advancing Australia*, op cit, 32-33.
- ⁷⁹ Paul Keating, *Advancing Australia*, op cit, 266.
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- ⁸¹ Hancock, 66.
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- ⁸³ Allan Martin in Grattan op cit, 180; see also Hughes, op cit, 106.
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- ⁸⁷ On the norms of dispersed leadership see J R Pennock *Democratic Political Theory*. Princeton University Press 1979, 478-500; and on the limits of executive supremacy see G Anastaplo *The Constitution of 1787: A Commentary*. Johns Hopkins University Press 1989, 89-123. On Australia's living without leadership, see H Stretton, 'The Quality of Leading Australians', in Graubard ed *Australia*, op cit, 197-230.
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