

abroad. I fear the same mood of unforgiveness may be meted out to Paul Keating.

Both men must have entertained doubts that the Treasury-ordained strategy they each followed was the correct one. Keynes, very much active in the 1920s, warned even then that playing around with high interest rates, even for short periods, was hellfire. It seems he found no converts with either Churchill or Keating.

If Keating's model is Churchill, John Hewson has as his inspiration Margaret Thatcher. Not only is *Fightback!* Thatcherite economics writ large, but its principal author exudes her tenacity—the more sustained the criticism, the more certain he becomes of the rightness of his cause. John Hewson fooled many of us by saying when first elected opposition leader in 1990 that all he really wanted was to be Treasurer. The impression was that he had been pressganged into the leadership by Liberal Party apparatchiks.

Having served as economic adviser to Treasurers Phil Lynch and John Howard, he said, he now wanted to pull the levers for himself. What

bunkum! A quick glance at Hewson's entry in *Who's Who* reveals a man on the make ever since he left Kogarah High. An academic economist told me recently that Hewson seriously started his run to be prime minister in the mid-80s. As work was to Essington Lewis, so competitive persistence is to John Hewson. As he put it: "I like competition. There's nothing like putting your balls on the line."

I'm told that, like me, John Hewson achieved only a lower second-class honours degree in economics. That did not stop him, unlike me, going off to get his Masters and PhD in quick succession from Johns Hopkins University. At that university Hewson might have crossed paths with Alan Walters, an expatriate English professor of economics who later went on to become Margaret Thatcher's personal economic adviser. He was the man primarily responsible for bringing monetarism to Britain.

Alan Walters is very much a man after Hewson's heart; a working class boy who rose to the top by dint of hard work, endless self-belief, and an unqualified faith in free market econom-

ics. Recently Walters was asked to comment on *Fightback!*. While blessing the GST, he balked at the high rate of 15%, believing that it would be a godsend to the Keating government. Walters pointed that even under Thatcher's consumption tax, such things as food, children's clothing and other essential expenditure are 'zero-rated'.

Hewson's reluctance to take counsel even from ideological soulmates betrays his 'I know best' arrogance. Hewson prides himself on being a can-do man, but the price effect of his GST on food will make can-openers of many of us. Many in the amphitheatre watching this "bit of sport" are therefore doubly reluctant to put their money on the GST man. A self-inflicted TKO for the contender may well be in the offing. However, the big fight is not over till the last ringing of the parliamentary bells. ■

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**John Hewson's assertion in October that Bob Carr was not "a full-blooded Australian" because he "doesn't drive" and "doesn't like kids" was far from a random blunder'. Rather, it was just one of many contributions that have been made in a continuous media battle between Labor and Liberal images of national identity.**

**T**he jousting began even before Paul Keating's ascension, with the launch of the Liberal/National *Fightback!* package. Much of the media coverage of the *Fightback!* has concentrated on the GST proposals, but the package also portrays a vision of what Australian society should be like. *Fightback!* pursues the Thatcherite strategy of attempting to break down class and other group identities by asserting that individualism is the major feature of national identity.

Whether they are wage earners or business people, the Coalition's message for Australians is the same. Australian citizens need to be hardworking, enterprising and independent, standing on their two feet rather than relying on government assistance and special interest groups such as trade unions. Or, as John Hewson put it in a more populist formulation, the millions of Australians who strive to be different need to apply the same inge-

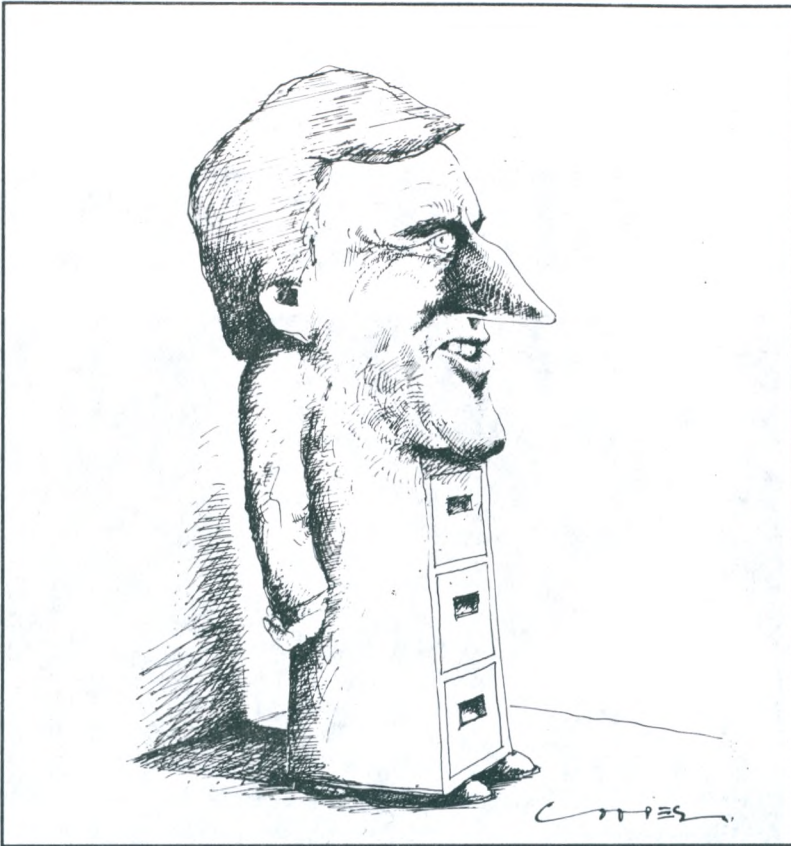
nuity and industry to their work that they apply to their gardens and their Holden Commodores. No wonder Dr Hewson expresses disdain for Labor leaders who do not own a driving licence! The Coalition's appeal to particular images of national identity is a conscious attempt to create a winning electoral coalition by evoking powerful images that impact upon voters' most intimate senses of self-worth. It is a strategy that links public discourse with personal recognition. Hence the references to personal matters, such as male virility and attitudes to children, that are normally left out of political point-scoring.

In his final parliamentary speech as Prime Minister, Bob Hawke responded to *Fightback!* by drawing on an old tradition of Labor populism, depicting the Liberals as confrontationalist troglodytes whose political ancestors had turned Gatling guns on Queensland workers. By contrast

## BOY'S TALK



ARTWORK: JENNY COOPES



Labor governments were depicted as supporting industrial harmony and an internationally competitive economy capable of providing higher standards of living to all. Australians from all backgrounds and walks of life would work to build the clever country. In this way, the Hawke vision of cooperative capitalism had always offered roles for individuals from various groups, including business people and workers, to identify with. However, Hawke's appeals to national identity were also an inherent part of his own persona: the larrikin reformed who embraced sobriety, monogamy and Pritikin; the sports-loving, dinky-di bloke who would pull his business and labour mates together for the common good.

Keating and Hawke shared a vision of the cooperative, efficient, clever country. However, Keating has had to enter into the debate over national identity much more explicitly, and some would say more clumsily, than Hawke. The collector of obscure foreign clocks and wearer of hand-stitched Italian suits has had to argue for a more multi-faceted national identity, in which alternative images of Australian manhood can be added to that of

the drunken yobbo who places shrimps on the barbie. While Hawke made affectionate references to the larrikinism he gave up when his country needed him most, Keating has risked offending large numbers of Australian men with beer glasses in their hands.

Much of the debate has had definite gender overtones as male virility and Holden Commodores vie with Hoganesque yobbos for public attention. Indeed it could be argued that *Fightback!* derives a great deal of its emotional force from a subtext about emasculation. It is *real men* who can support their families while taking on unions and competing in international markets. It is *real men* who can support their families while taking on unions and competing in international markets. It is *real men* such as John Hewson who can stand up to 'special interest' groups ranging from vehicle manufacturers to the tourism industry. The Coalition's concept of masculinity is implicitly contrasted with a Labor model in which, it is suggested, wimpish men rely on government handouts or corrupt forms of mateship rather than standing on their own two feet to support their families.

Belatedly the two leaderships have only now begun to turn their attention to the question of where women fit in their scenarios. As Dr Hewson's recent speech to the Liberal's National Women's Conference made clear, the insights he gained while ironing have reinforced his commitment to the *Fightback!* strategy. Labor, he argued, still sees women as members of groups rather than as individuals; only the Coalition can facilitate women's individual aspirations. Meanwhile Keating, having tried to reshape Australian masculine identity, argues that our UN-approved laws on the status of women should be promoted overseas to improve our image in the rest of the world. Women could be forgiven for thinking that their inclusion in the debates over national identity has been a matter of too little, too late. The agenda has already been set by the debate over national stereotypes, and women are appearing in a bit-part.

While both leaders' somewhat heavy-handed attempts at populism have sometimes had a humorous side, the issues are actually very serious ones for both sides of politics. *Fightback!* speaks of the need "to achieve a generational change in policies and attitudes" in which an Australian identity based upon individualism and self-reliance will be asserted. The battle between Liberal and Labor images of identity is not a distraction from the real issues facing Australia; it is an attempt to gain electoral support for powerful images of national and group identity that are implicitly associated with different policy outcomes. Are we going to be Hewson's self-reliant individuals building a Thatcherite enterprise culture, or are we going to be Labor's individuals, members of groups working together to create a cooperative capitalism? The answer will have a major impact on how much the health and welfare sector will be cut over the next few years, on the extent of privatisation, deregulation and corporatisation and on whether the trade union movement will be seen to have a positive role to play in society. ■

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