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.

The 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 ingenuity 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 confrontationist troglodytes whose political ancestors had turned Gatling guns on Queensland workers. By contrast...
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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