

# Soul Talk

Hugh Dillon

William Deane

DIRECTIONS: A VISION FOR AUSTRALIA

St Pauls, \$19.95pb, 136pp, 1 876295 47 3

Tony Stephens

SIR WILLIAM DEANE: THE THINGS THAT MATTER

Hodder, \$29.95pb, 271pp, 0 7336 1528 7

‘DOES AUSTRALIA HAVE A SOUL?’ I have been asked this question recently, in slightly different ways, by Russian, German and French friends. They comprehend that Australians have an identity, but their question is about something deeper than words, about what animates us at a profound level and which is related to our identification with the land. They say Australians demonstrate many estimable qualities, but they think that, apart from the indigenous peoples, our roots are still shallow. They think we have shed our European histories but are culturally adolescent.

The question is reasonable and important. Can a nation of this type, built on waves of immigrants, develop a ‘soul’ (as a European would understand it) in only a little over 200 years? Australia is, after all, part of a new world that is rapidly being ‘globalised’. We do not have 1000 years of peasantry, feudalism and civil war as a forge upon which a national soul has been hammered out. But the end of the twentieth century saw a battle of ideas, a *kulturkampf*, begin over the question of what it means to be Australian and what Australia is to become.

In 1996 the defeat of Paul Keating and the election of John Howard seemed superficially to signal that Australia’s dominant concern was ‘the economy, stupid’. Both Keating and Howard knew, however, that the election was about fashioning Australia’s understanding of itself as much as pulling economic levers. The debate over cultural questions is a wide and penetrating conversation in the community, but one punctuated by cynicism on the part of poll-driven politicians about the electorate, and on the part of an electorate whose blood pressure was being constantly taken by spin-doctors and knew it.

Australia, unlike the USA and Britain, does not yet have a political scripture. We have never had a Jefferson, a Lincoln, a Martin Luther King, a Cromwell or a Churchill rise up among us to speak to us in words that will command our faith and hope. Our flat accents are matched by a certain flatness of political tone. It is a dangerous project for Australian political leaders to attempt to project grandiose visions of the nation, for they create messianic expectations that are, in our experience, almost immediately crushed by demonstrations of human fallibility or hubris.

If we do not yet have our own Lincoln, Sir William Deane’s writing sometimes shimmers with that extraordinary combination of elegant diction and profundity that marks great rhetoric. It is doubtful that any national leader has spoken more eloquently about ANZAC and Australia’s military history while at the same time linking them to our multicultural diversity and our bonds with Aboriginal people than Deane did in a speech to the RSL Congress in 1998:

[W]e recall that on Gallipoli itself were men as diverse as Sir John Monash, a descendant of German Jews; Private Sing, an Aborigine who was said to have been the most successful Australian sniper during the campaign; John Simpson, who had migrated to Australia from Britain only four years before the outbreak of war; and Captain Lalor, the grandson of Peter Lalor, Eureka Stockade’s rebel leader. On the beach at Anzac Cove, no one questioned those men’s backgrounds. The rising sun badge worn by each of them was enough.

Tony Stephens’s book is not a biography but rather an extended profile piece and a commentary on Deane’s work as Australia’s twenty-second governor-general, built around a collection of his most important speeches. *Directions* is a modest (I think *too* modest) collection of excerpts from seventy-six of his speeches and interviews, and thus the two books overlap to a very considerable extent. *Directions* undersells Deane as a wordsmith. One can sympathise with his editors, selecting from a smorgasbord, but an extract gives the mere essence of his ideas without much flavour. Fewer but longer pieces would have made it a better book. Stephens,

on the other hand, is lavish with Deane's own words. There is some repetition, but it is a fault of generosity. If a theme unifies the two books, it might be, to put it in European terms, the question: what kind of soul is Australia to develop?

Through the crackle of emotion and rhetoric that characterised many of the principal cultural arguments of the last decade — Mabo, Wik, One Nation, republicanism, immigration, asylum seekers, political correctness, 'race cards', September 11 — Bill Deane threaded his gentle but insistent message. No one could mistake his voice for one of self-interest. Tribalism was anathema to him. There was no brutal invective for those who disagreed with him, and no 'core promises'. You could trust what he said. If anyone was working at the forge on Australia's soul during that time, it was Bill Deane.

Deane, adopting Sir Zelman Cowen's words, understood his job to be 'to interpret the Australian nation to itself' and, putting his own gloss on this reading, 'to hold up a mirror' for the nation to see itself and its problems. While I can find no direct reference in his speeches to Lincoln's marvellous appeal, in his second Inaugural Address, to 'the better angels of our nature', Deane seemed determined to address them, to elevate the nation's thinking about itself and its concerns above the tumult that blew through the country as Keating, Howard, Hanson, republicans, Aboriginal advocates, Greens and monarchists fought for hearts and minds.

Three themes appear again and again in his speeches: 'multicultural inclusiveness'; 'the spirit of ANZAC'; 'the generosity and sense of fair play of ordinary Australians'. These were the pillars of the hundreds of speeches he delivered throughout his nearly six years as governor-general. To the enormous irritation of bellicose and divisive politicians, he insisted that 'the ultimate test of our worth as a truly democratic nation is how we treat the most disadvantaged and vulnerable of our citizens'. Graham Campbell only earned himself the contempt of most Australians by calling Deane 'Holy Billy'. Mutual respect between, and reconciliation of, all Australians was Deane's Five-Year Plan. His appeal to the better angels of our nature fell on many receptive ears.

Thin-lipped Howard government members intimidated, especially when he spoke on Aboriginal matters, that the governor-general ought to pipe down. Deane, however, subtly distinguished between identifying the nation's problems, which he felt he was properly entitled to do, and their solutions, which was the province of the politicians. He knew where to find Australia's soul. Deane walked with homeless men and called them 'Mister'. He opened Admiralty House to children. He shared his table with the original Australians. He knew that the difference between a High Court judge and a man or a woman on the streets was marginal compared with their shared humanity. Their pain, and their hopes, became his. He truly was 'his brother's keeper'.