

debate in Australia. Many prominent Australians from across the political spectrum are already singing its praises, from Gareth Evans and Mark Latham to Nick Greiner and Christopher Pyne. With any luck the next generation of Australian leaders will take up the challenge and some of the ambitious ideas in the *Imagining Australia* will be put into practice.

Reviewed by Michael Walsh

*A World Out of Balance:
American Ascendancy and
International Politics in the
21st Century*

By Coral Bell

Sydney, Longueville Books,
2003, 220pp, \$24.95,
ISBN 1920 681 1078

There is a certain poetry to the writing of a scholar who has cast a discerning eye over world affairs for over half a century. In her most recent book, *A World Out of Balance*, Coral Bell writes with a lightness of touch and subtlety of thought that can derive only from long-accumulated knowledge and experience. Bell's world view has been well honed through decade after decade of analytical encounters with the vicissitudes of world politics, and her ability to traverse the terrain of international history to the confusing landscape of contemporary global politics can only be envied.

Bell's project is to understand 'how politics between nations operates in the absence of a central balance of

power' (p.13). Here she returns to one of the central themes of her life's work—the idea, so central to realist thought, that international order depends, in a deep and fundamental way, on the maintenance of a balance of power among predominant states. What is the fate of international order in a unipolar world, when a single superpower stands head and shoulders above the rest?

In pursuit of an answer, Bell begins, in classic realist fashion, by mapping the relative capacities of the leading states. Comparing their territory, population and resources, economic and technological competence, political and social cohesion, governmental and administrative capacity for crisis decision-making, military muscle, and ability to secure bandwagoning from other states, she concludes that we are indeed within a long 'unipolar moment', one that she expects to last as long as the Cold War that preceded it.

Bell is sensitive, however, to the complexities of contemporary global politics, to the way in which the system of great powers is embedded within webs of wider social processes and normative developments. She is attuned, for example, to the effects of economic and communications globalisation, and to the patterns of political dissent and conflict these produce. She identifies key contradictions between the politics of sovereignty and identity, between the needs of growing populations and the distribution of resources, and between old 'realist/rationalist' international norms and emergent 'cosmopolitan' standards of international and national conduct.

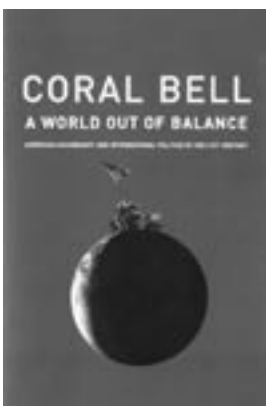
Bell's realism is of the classical variety, more indebted to Carr and Morgenthau, and departed friends in the English School, like Martin Wight and Hedley Bull, than to the more rarefied writings of Kenneth Waltz and the 'neorealists'. Hers is not the realism of simple conclusions. She predicts that unipolarity will persist for several decades, but that

global complexities will demand that Washington relearn the art of diplomacy if it is to conscript the kind of international support needed to manage crises in a world economic globalisation, transnational violence and the cosmopolitanisation of international norms. Her hope, again betraying her classical realist sympathies, is that eventually a new concert of powers will emerge, instilling some stability and adroit crisis management to the system.

Bell's book is a good example of the common ground now occupied by many classical realists, liberals, and constructivists. This having been said, though, I would like to push Bell on a number of issues.

The first concerns the relationship between unipolarity and America's political influence. For realists, the polarity of an international system determines patterns of political influence, and, given their logic, we should expect unipolarity to yield American hegemony, defined as the ability of its policy-makers to dictate the rules of international society. But this is clearly not the world we live in. America's material lead on its nearest competitors is noteworthy, but so too is Washington's frustration translating this lead into sustained political influence. Bell's strategy here is to assert the analytical value of the concept of unipolarity, but to argue that hegemony is too high a bar to expect of any state in the contemporary world order. But this dodges the central issue: if unipolarity does not deliver hegemony, then power is being conditioned by very substantial forces that lie outside the standard realist lexicon. We must even ask how analytically valuable the concept of unipolarity is if it leaves the dynamics of contemporary power politics substantially occluded.

A second concern relates to the issue of complexity. As we have noted, Bell is sensitive to a range of new forces conditioning world affairs, from globalisation to normative shift. And when each of these arises in her



discussion, they receive subtle and thoughtful treatment. Bell's home territory, however, is the world of state power, and it is this that always retains primary causal significance. My point here is not the extreme one of 'the state is dead in the face of globalisation or transnationalism'. Rather, my concern is the analytical one of whether we should grant these forces independent salience and how we should judge their transformative potential. Here we see the down side of Bell's style of analysis. There are now substantial literatures on the constitutive power of social norms, on the strengths and weaknesses of institutions, and on the many faces of globalisation. Yet Bell barely gives these literatures a sideways glance, which leaves her unable to say something of a deeper nature about the relationship between these forces and global power.

Finally, Bell's work bears the mark of a core realist anxiety. Namely, that realists purport to identify the true underlying dynamics driving international politics, yet they are constantly confronted by policy-makers who act in ways contrary to these dynamics. For Bell, this anxiety permeates her discussions of the Bush Administration. I remember a conversation with her when the Bush team came to office, when she noted the extraordinary, and undeniable, foreign policy experience of the group. It is clear from the book, though, that the team has failed the diplomatic test, that they have failed to understand the importance of legitimacy in undergirding American power. For many of us, ideologically driven irrationality is the root of this failure. Bell is reluctant to reach such conclusions though, occupying instead a more ambivalent stance toward the current administration. This seems, in part, to be because of her own past assessment of Rumsfeld, Cheney, Rice and others as sober, policy-hardened realists, but it also derives, I think, from a general realist reluctance to call ideology by its name and to acknowledge the central place

of irrationality in international relations.

These quibbles aside, Bell's *A World Out of Balance* is a fine contribution to contemporary debates about unipolarity and world politics. It is also a tribute to her long career as one of Australia's most important and much loved analysts of world affairs. She has been a voice in almost all of the key debates animating Australian international relations scholars for decades, and I will not be the only one who learns much from this most recent intervention.

**Reviewed by
Professor Chris Reus-Smit**

*The Power of Speech:
Australian Prime Ministers
Defining the National Image*
By James Curran
Melbourne University Press,
2004, 304pp, \$35,
ISBN 0522850987

This excellent book illustrates two major features of political life that tend to be forgotten in an age of generalisations and ideological conflict. The first is the importance of particularity; that individuals are moulded by particular circumstances and cannot be accounted for by reference to general *Zeitgeists*. The second is that things are not always as they seem and one should beware of using individuals, even highly significant individuals such as Prime Ministers, as emblematic of their age.

This book seeks to explore the development of Australian nationalism over the past 50 years through the words of Australian Prime Ministers, with a particular emphasis on Whitlam and his successors. In a sense the title is misleading; it does

not really engage in a close analysis of the rhetoric and language of these men. Rather, it explores their ideas through an exploration of their lives, upbringing, influences, careers and public statements.

The theme of the book is that every Prime Minister since the 1960s has had to deal with the fact that the old Australian identity of what Keith Hancock once called 'independent British Australians' has largely faded away but that it has not been a simple case of replacing it with an 'Australian identity'. The response of individual Prime Ministers has largely depended on their particular upbringing and experiences. These have been various, illustrating that any idea of an Australian 'national culture' must be understood in a relatively loose way.

Gough Whitlam was the product of a classical education, a father who was an internationalist and advocate of human rights and the tradition of British parliamentary government. His 'new nationalism' was not that of Don's Party but of a man who, in the tradition of Evatt, was really a liberal internationalist. Only in retrospect, seen through the eyes of nationalist and radical authors and historians, does Whitlam become confused with Barry McKenzie.

Malcolm Fraser equally emerges as a much more complex figure in Curran's hands; no mention of Ayn Rand but rather of Gilbert Ryle, post-war Oxford and Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*. Curran emphasises that Fraser 'maintained a deep suspicion of nationalism' and was animated by a genuine fear of communism and a desire that individuals be left alone to make their own way in the world. Likewise Bob Hawke experienced the world of Oxford in the 1950s but his primary influence, according to Curran, was

