

## **The Australian work in progress**



*Australia Day breakfast*

*ACT branch, Order of Australia Association*

*Royal Canberra Golf Club*

*Yarralumla*

*January 26 2016*



Before I commence I wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this place and all lands upon which the golf club, and Canberra, is located, and pay my respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Indigenous Australia.

For many of us, they also have within them, in those memories, those traditions, those cultures and those hopes something of the future of our nationhood that we all want for ourselves in this land of theirs which we now call home. There are many great Australians who have remarked that until we fully integrate our first people into our sense of ourselves as a sovereign nation, we are diminished, inadequate, and unable to rise to our full station.

On Australia Day last year, I wrote an article heavily criticising some of what seemed to me dangerous, and un-Australian trends that were coming to be associated with Australia Day. I am not so het up about it this year, perhaps because there was never before such a good time to be Australian, or so we are told.

But it is also because it seems to me that we have recently seen some lessening of that sense of siege about the community which to my ear, and my eye, was doing rather more to divide rather than to unite us. A time of hot talk about whether one was on or off the

Team Australia bus. About artificially depriving some members of our community of their citizenship, depending on the perceptions of people who thought they had a right to stop people in the street to demand evidence of their citizenship.

A time of polarising politics and ramped up fears of the other is not a good time to be a proud Australian. A proud Australian is not a paranoid Australian, nor one as focused on resentment of the positions of others. The Australian crowd has never been kind, particularly when it has been orchestrated.

Such a time is not a good time if one is already marginalised in the community. Sometimes, of course, by short residence. Sometimes, it seems in respect of indigenous people, by long residence. And sometimes merely by difference, particularly difference from the mainstream. The legendary Australian tolerance, and belief in a fair go, has never, in our history, gone far from the veranda.

Now I am here today to celebrate Australia Day, not to belittle it. But it is a part of that celebration that one face up to facts of history and society, particularly its enduring elements. Many of the things we hold good – sometimes, less convincingly, unique – about Australia came to be when we were a very different sort of society.

Some of the claims we make about a national character, including time-honoured ones about mateship, tolerance, good humour and belief in the fair go, can endure only when understood in the context of times in which cultural differences were more narrow. If they are to endure they must be refashioned for a fundamentally different community, if one still recognisably grown from the old tree.

Partisans on both sides of the history and culture wars have always interpreted and reinterpreted past events, people of history and the so-called ordinary Australian in manners to suit themselves. Some of the legends do not stand up to close analysis. It may not matter much, as mere past history. It can matter a lot when we are invited

to use that history as a prism with which to see the present or to take the nation in the future.

Some of the present political turmoil in the US, particularly with the rise of Donald Trump, comes from a sense deep within the white American working class and lower middle class that they have lost their old place, their old power and their old influence. The American they know has disappeared, they think. They feel, they say, strangers in their own land. Their politicians have deserted them, and pander to other interest groups, in ways they think to be “un-American”.

American society, the economy and politics has changed, and needs to be reclaimed, with “real” Americans restored to the place they once had.

We have similar groups in Australia, feeling equally dispossessed, even if their discontent is more spasmodic. They too see themselves as the “real Australians”, compared with which, other citizens are somehow second rate or unworthy. Curiously, many define, and resist, any idea of constitutional indigenous status, the sort of respect they are asking for themselves, as asking for unfair privileges.

I think that one of the functions of Australia Day is to say that we are not planning to go backwards. We can, we should, reflect with some pride and nostalgia for what there was and what we have made of this country. We can triumph our achievements. But it is also necessarily an appreciation done with realism, and recognition that there have been mistakes which we do not want to repeat or to persist. We want, in short, a better Australia, not an Australia set in some romantic notion of how things were at a different time.

Typically, some of our weaknesses come from our strengths. Gold and the success of the convict scheme gave Australians the highest standard of living in the world by the time of federation. It made us ambitious for our whole society, apart, perhaps for Aborigines whom we consciously excluded from our constitution. A democratic spirit and some belief in what collective society could achieve saw

progress with women's rights, universal suffrage, social security and mass education.

The prosperity, and the population, were ruined by a total war of amazing ferocity, from which we are still recovering. That's a process not, in my opinion, assisted by the orgy of celebration and commemoration over the past year, if only because those responsible forget that this was a war fought by and for civilians. War itself brought legends of shared sacrifice and some martial vigour, even if it decimated our male population and did worse to survivors.

Some belief that the appalling sacrifice should not have been in vain led some Australians to think of themselves as trustees for the many who had died. It was not by coincidence that such groupings came to see themselves as something more than welfare agencies for those flattened by their experience. They became reactionary forces seeing themselves, if not without opposition, as having earned a right and duty to pronounce on politics, personal morality, religious notions and the extension of rights to foreigners, or Aborigines. The volunteer men and women who fought for their nation abroad deserve our honour and respect. But one is entitled, for example, to writhe in shame that they would not allow Aborigines to be members of their clubs, or that they provided the moral leadership resisting any form of racial desegregation in rural Australia in the 1950s and 1960s.

I am a proud sixth generation Australian. I have ancestors from all over, but nine of my 16 great great grandparents were of Irish Catholic extraction. For three quarters of the European history of Australia, Irish Catholics did not belong to the social, political or economic mainstream, even when political parties they effectively controlled governed Australia.

In my lifetime, most of the sectarian bitterness has disappeared. Legacies are everywhere but it has been impossible, for at least 40 years, to separate Australian Catholics from Protestants by any socio-economic clues.

That's good, a reflection we should all triumph is the success of Australia as a melting pot of many cultures, or, perhaps, of a general decline in the significance of religion in society. But one cannot suppose that this history of inclusion and exclusion did not help shape the national character. Or characters and personalities on either side of the cycles of mutual fear and loathing, exclusion and discrimination. Even now that history is being reflected in the tragic tales of abuse within our institutions. That too is a part of the story of Australia Day.

There was nothing that is being said about Muslims, and by some leading politicians, shock jocks or people in the pub that was not said about Catholics 100 years ago. Indeed, there has been nothing said of Aborigines, now or then, that has not been solemnly and sincerely said about Irish Australians over the past 200 years.

In the years soon after federation, as through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, our loyalty was highly suspect, whether because we were said to be in thrall to Rome or to Irish nationalism in Dublin. A good many people feared that the Irish could never assimilate, but were doomed to a feckless, superstitious and violent poverty, one which dragged down the whole community. Mercifully, there was effective geographic segregation in all of the larger cities. Catholics were actively excluded from some of the occupations and professions, and, of course, the more silly Catholics proved the worst fears of the mainstream by themselves organising in secret societies to do much the same.

Later Catholics and Protestant came together to resist migration by Jews --- we made our own contribution to the Holocaust by conscious delay in taking refugees pre-war. Post war many influential politicians, and, I might say, the *Canberra Times* vehemently opposed the entry of Jewish refugees, primarily because, they said, history had shown us that they were unassimilable, and because Jews were inevitably involved in crime and black markets. Such guardians did not hesitate to add that they were up to their necks in terrorism in Palestine, and might well bring it here.

The same talk of the step too far, and the unassimilability of, in turn, Italians, Greeks, people from the Balkans, Turks, Lebanese became even more shrill after the White Australian Policy was abolished. When the first people came from the sub-continent and Indochina, we were told, we were threatening social cohesion by going too far, too fast. Senior politicians have pandered to the fears, right up to the present day. Those who take them on are accused of creating a stifling climate of political correctness.

Each fresh nationality, fresh ethnic, religious or cultural grouping was in turn accused of exploiting our welfare system, managing the drug trade, causing explosions of crime and making Australians feel like strangers in their own land. By when in due course the overwhelming majority proved themselves good citizens, we had fresh waves of immigrants to scream about. In true Australian democratic fashion, those most vehemently against the latest wave would often be members of the previous one, now totally absorbed into the community.

Some Australians were bemused, 40 years ago, when one of those speaking out against migrants and migration was Charles Perkins, the Aboriginal leader. Perkins was being pragmatic, not racist. He feared that in a more multicultural Australia, the status and special position of indigenous people might be as simply one of a large set of clamant groups, progressively being swamped by bigger ones.

He was wrong about that but, perhaps, only because the Australian society we celebrate today was changing as its composition changed. It's a different nation, and a different body politic today, and for that, I think, we should all be thankful. The progress of Aboriginal Australians over the past 50 years has been very disappointing. But, put bluntly, it would be a lot worse had its progress been under the control of people who style themselves, even as against the indigenous, as the "real" Australians. I know a good many of these real Australians, even in this day and age, who would lend a perfect stranger \$100 or give anyone the shirt off their

back, but who begrudge the slightest concession made to Aboriginal Australians.

That Aborigines feel particularly excluded on this date, of all dates, is natural enough, but it is hardly less shameful on that account. I think that a part of the discussion of Australia Day, and what it means to be Australian involves wondering whether there might not be a more appropriate day on which to celebrate it. Mercifully, there's never been a national tradition about January 26 until very recently.

I think it is a necessary part of Australia Day that there be a fierce debate about what it means. In this debate the sincerity of some of those who borrow their ideas, their liturgy and their patriotic toys from other countries must be allowed to be disputed. The history of the US, for example, is quite different from Australia's. Much as we might like Americans, there are many of us who find their patriotic effusions too much.

I can, in particular, never quite understand their need to constantly reassure themselves that theirs is the greatest nation on earth. Perhaps it's not self-evidently true. But Americans can, if they must, clutch their heart as they sing their national anthem. They may treat their flag as if it were a sacred object. It's their thing. But it's not ours, and, done by Australians looks pretentious, counterfeit, fake and, frankly a bit silly. Used, as it so often is, by way of saying to the world that "I am more Australian – more patriotic – more a member of Team Australia --- than thou", it is quite disgusting. It's not Australian.

And even for those who worship official history, there has never been any military history of affected reverence for the flag, whichever one of very many our troops were using at any particular time. Nor was there one of military liturgy, or frankly, worship of professional soldiers, as opposed to volunteers. I admire our defence forces, the more so for the way in which they carry out duty in times

of danger. But our war memorials and memories are only incidentally about them, as opposed to us.

At this anniversary of the beginning of European settlement of Australia, we reflect again that we have all of the ingredients with which we can make this physical continent, and all of the people who inhabit it, a better place. We have all of the ingredients with which our nation can be an exemplary citizen of the world, not least in helping neighbours who are not as well off.

We have peace. Perhaps as importantly, we have stability. Social stability. Political stability. Economic stability. We have growth. Freedom. A good deal of respect for human dignity. There is general economic prosperity. Other nations envy our domestic stability and judge us a great place to park their money. Beyond the original Australians, Australia is composed of people of many nations, races and places, often people coming as a result of persecution, dislocation, ethnic social and religious strife. They came to a land and a community where they were safe, were treated with respect and allowed to live as they wanted, provided they did not frighten the horses. In due course most acquired a citizenship, a pedigree and a right to class themselves as being, in law as in fact, as Australian as anyone else. It is absolutely typical of our national character that they will assert this citizenship with as much vehemence as anyone else.

Making life even better is a common project. But it is one grounded in that mixture of history, culture law and facts, that basket of rights and duties, freedoms and responsibility – that freedom under law – that defines our nationhood. That involves looking forward as much as backwards, with an open mind about the present. Australia is, still, a work in progress and a hard marker could – would – write “could do better”.