Australian Identity in the 21ˢᵗ century

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Summary:

The contemporary state of Australian national identity needs to be understood in terms of how it has changed over the past sixty years. This can be summarised as follows:

1. Australians traditionally had a national identity that developed during the 19ᵗʰ and early 20ᵗʰ century that was complemented by a British identity to form a larger identity.
2. The 'end of empire' disrupted the British identity and created a vacuum in the wider Australian identity.
3. After the 'new nationalism' of the 1970s the Australian educated elites began to become highly critical of the older Australian national identity and also to embrace a new internationalist outlook.
4. These attacks have their origins in the old English imperial idea that Australians either had no culture or that that culture was worthless.
5. These attacks have targeted the self-worth of ordinary Australians.
6. Many national Australian institutions, especially the universities, have failed in their national responsibilities to the Australian people by viewing themselves as being international in nature.
7. There needs to be a new wider Australian national identity fostered that reconciles the reality of Australian identity with an international outlook such as had existed in Australia prior to the 1960s.

Introduction:

During the 1ˢᵗ half of the 20ᵗʰ century Australians developed an ideal of national character that was simultaneously British and Australian and with a powerful democratic inflection. The period between 1890 and 1945, during which Immigration to Australia was limited, saw the consolidation of a distinctive Australian culture that existed side by side with a powerful belief that Australia was '98% British' (Hancock, 1930, 53) . This culture was created by the descendants of convicts and free settlers, British, Irish, with a smaller admixture of other peoples, in particular Lutherans. As Len Hume (1993) persuasively argued a distinctive Australian culture was particularly pronounced at the level of popular culture, where there was no so-called 'cultural cringe' and deference to the English by ordinary Australians. 'Cultural cringe' only really affected the elite who were educated at private schools based on the English model who took seriously the judgements of visiting English writers such as D H Lawrence (1986) and John Douglas Pringle (1961) that Australians had no culture.

That Australians had a national culture, and the nature of that culture, can be seen in following quip from the great humourist Lennie lower (1963, 130): 'Australia is now a nation. We are entitled to call ourselves a nation because we owe several billion pounds abroad and are among the highest taxed people in the world.' This national culture was in many ways best expressed by Australian performers and writers who could see humour in the Australian experience including Steel Hall and Mo. Dad Rudd and McCackie's Mansion are emblematic of that culture.

Two key events post-World War II were to upset this well-established Australian identity. The first was the mass immigration programme that was instituted to populate the country in response to what had happened in the war when the Japanese came close to invading the country. For the first time large numbers of immigrants came to Australia from places other than Britain, and over the years the net for possible immigrants being cast ever wider. The second was that the connections with Britain slowly faded as the ties of empire unravelled and Britain sought a new place for itself through membership of the European community. It is worth pointing out that the second of these developments were far more significant for the educated elite than for ordinary Australians because the British connection had always been more important for them. A number of implications followed from these developments:

- One major response to these changing circumstances was the emergence of the so-called 'new nationalism', especially during the Whitlam years. This saw a self-conscious attempt to create a national identity that would cast aside older ties with Britain and allow Australia to sail forth as a new country free of the shackles of colonialism. Again, the 'new nationalism' should be viewed as largely an elite activity. It focused around such things as the promotion of 'Australian studies', the promotion of Australian film, a new national anthem, an Australian republic and a new flag.

- The 'new nationalist' moment in recent Australian history now appears to have been somewhat fleeting. By the time of the Bicentennial in 1988 many members of the educated elite had decided that Australian nationalism was not a 'good thing' and began an aggressive campaign designed to demonstrate the evils of the Australian past particularly with regard to the treatment of its Indigenous inhabitants. This also involved a sort of 'declaration of war' by the new educated elites on what they saw as the failings of the ordinary Australian people. These elites were the heirs of the earlier elites who had worshipped at the shrine of Englishness and had absorbed the English colonial view that there was nothing of value in ordinary Australian culture. In this way many of the views of contemporary Australian educated elites indicates how deeply they have imbibed a colonialist mentality.

- There was a simultaneous push to emphasise the multicultural nature of Australia based on the growing cultural diversity of its population. New Australians, along with Indigenous Australians, have often been praised by the educated elite for possessing cultures that old Australians do not possess.

- I would argue that these developments stemmed from real problems caused by the vacuum created by the end of what is best termed 'Britishness' in Australian culture. All of the great Australian leaders from Hughes to Curtin to Chifley to Menzies had a powerful appreciation of Australia as being both British and Australian. Then, quite suddenly in the second half of the 1960s Australians had to face the reality that they were no longer wanted by the British.

- I would also argue that there has been a failure by Australia and Australians, primarily at the elite level, to find an adequate new form of identity to replace the older one. This is particularly the case with the 'British' element of that identity. Having been cut loose from empire, they have failed over the past fifty years to carve out a place for themselves in the world. One example of this can be seen in terms of the changing Australian economy. In the 1950s Australia still largely 'rode on the sheep's back'. There were then grandiose ideas of creating manufacturing industries and this was followed in the 1990s by the dream, promoted by Donald Horne (1989), that Australia would become the 'clever country'. In reality the economic well-being of the country has been maintained by the export of minerals, especially coal and iron ore, and the country is held hostage to world commodity markets. Without the sale of commodities Australia may well have become a banana

republic and lost its democratic character. In this sense, Australia in 2019 is not all that different to the Australia in 1949.

- The failure to articulate a new balanced sense of national identity post-empire can be laid at the feet of the elites, in particular the educated elites. The 'old Australian' national identity was organic in the sense that it was developed in a largely unconscious fashion by the Australian people. By and large, it was not a construct created and imposed by the elite but an outgrowth of the beliefs and practices of the Australian people. They were unselfconsciously quite happy with the identity that they possessed, even as the elites, obsessed with English approval sneered at them. The Australian national identity until the 1960s was complemented by an equally unconscious sense that Australia was fundamentally British in nature. The international links implied in the British dimension helped to balance out the more strictly local quality of the national identity.

- It can be argued that in an earlier period there was a certain harmony existing between the ideas of the intellectual elite and those of the wider community. Such a harmony is crucial for the health of any democratic nation. A good example of this is provided by one of Australia's most significant political thinkers Hugh Stretton. Stretton put a lot of his intellectual energy into the issue of housing, because how people are housed are a tangible expression of its culture and values. I would describe Stretton as a sort of suburban utopian who saw properly designed suburbs as key to our status as a democratic people. In particular, he was in favour of what he called 'mixed suburbs' where there was no great geographical distance separating the well off and the less well off (Davison, 2018: 57—73). The segregation of people of different economic backgrounds has increased in recent years, thereby aggravating the distinctions between the educated elite and ordinary Australians. The decline of the suburban ideal in favour of people living in soulless high-rise apartments will have an enormous impact on the democratic nature of Australian culture.

- One indication of the way in which Australian political culture has changed are the significant changes in the way in which politics and the constitution are understood. The key moment in this regard was 1975 when the old culture that had informed the workings of parliament since 1901, a culture that emphasised the Westminster system and the importance of inherited British ways of doing things was trumped by the reality that the Constitution as a legal document was central to Australian politics. This has meant that a politics founded on shared understandings, often implicit, has been replaced by a far more abstract and legalistic approach to political matters. This is best illustrated recently by the way in which Section 44 of the Constitution has been used as a political weapon to attack one's political opponents. It is also illustrated by the increasing appeal to abstract human rights rather than to the democratic values of Australian political culture and the Australian people.

- A democratic culture founded on implicit shared understandings has slowly but surely been replaced by one in which there are significant divisions and which places far more emphasis on abstract understandings of the world, especially by the educated elites. This has led to those elites adopting what is best described as an oligarchical attitude based on the idea that they know best.

- At this stage ideas associated with multiculturalism began to merge with a new internationalist outlook that followed in the wake of what is often described as globalisation. For the elites, the idea of nation and nationalism became not just unfashionable but the manifestation of an unethical approach to the world. In many ways, this was a re-birth of the old imperial sentiment amongst the elites, only that it now became a somewhat abstract and bloodless sort of allegiance to a set of vague and airy ideas about the international

order. It was no longer informed by a concrete sense of a wider imperial belonging complementing a national belonging but, instead, pitted an abstract ideal of internationalism against an organic nationalism.

To recap, the response to the 'end of empire' in Australia was initially the 'new nationalism' but also the growth of a belief in multiculturalism. Then, in the early 2000s the new nationalism became increasingly unpopular amongst the educated elites as, simultaneously, much of its substance was appropriated by John Howard. The hostile reaction to Howard was an indication that many members of the new educated elites had become hostile to the older Australian identity and to the values of those ordinary Australians who, unselfconsciously, still adhered to that identity.

The Current state of play

With these changes, the issue of national identity is now quite different to what it was in the 1980s. At that stage, in the wake of the new nationalism, there was still quite a strong attachment to both an ideal of Australian national identity and to democracy as an inherent feature of that identity. This can be seen in the Prime Ministership of Bob Hawke and the willingness of the Australian populace to make sacrifices for the public good as expressed in the Accord. At the elite level, there was still a level of support for an Australian national identity as can be seen by the desire to celebrate the Bicentennial and support for the study of things Australian in schools and universities, which set up such things as Australian Studies Centres during these years.

In more recent times this support for Australian national identity by the educated elites has waned, particularly at the elite level of Australian culture. It can be argued that this decline of interest in Australian culture has been matched by a decline in the democratic fabric of Australian society, especially amongst elites and elite institutions. Internationalism is not favourable to the democratic instinct as it seeks to remove the power of making decisions away from the local area and placing it in the hands of people far removed from the local area. It favours such things as international human rights as opposed to local democratic practices. What is lost is the important principle of subsidiarity.

It is important to see that these developments of hostility to national identity, a more international outlook and a decline in democratic sentiment are most pronounced amongst the educated elites. It is matched by their distaste for Australian popular culture and desire to live in the new 'international cities' of Sydney and Melbourne and avoid the world of Australian suburbia. As discussed above, the new internationally oriented elite have lost their old Britishness but have, nevertheless, internalised older attitudes from the English that Australian culture either does not exist or is worthless, the only exceptions being Indigenous culture and the cultures brought to Australia since World War II to which they have a very favourable attitude.

In part, this growing attitude of the educated elites towards Australian culture has played a major role in both the malaise of rural Australia, best described in Gabrielle Chan's *Rusted Off* (2018), and the emergence of populism as a response to that malaise. Although the English imperial masters despised Australian culture, they left it alone. The new educated elites, following in their footsteps, would like nothing better than to eradicate that culture. For most people, there is nothing worse than an attack on their sense of self-worth and these attacks have had a significantly negative effect on ordinary Australians.

It can be argued that despite these developments the sense of Australian identity, along with democratic sentiment, remains quite strong amongst large parts of the Australian population who are resistant to these elite tendencies. However, over time, this older national identity is in danger

of being eroded further as the values of the educated elites seep through to the wider population. These values are spread largely through the education system.

There are a number of ways in which the Australian national identity has undergone significant challenges over the past thirty years. There has been a decline in the teaching of things Australian at Australian universities, especially in the areas of history, politics and literature. It is true that students now have a much more strongly international outlook than they did thirty years ago. This is not necessarily a bad thing but, as with all things, it is a matter of balance. One should always strive for the golden mean.

How Australian universities exemplify the problem

The current situation can be illustrated best by considering developments in Australian universities:

- Australian universities were established as national institutions designed to serve the national interest. They are funded by the Australian people and they expend a lot of time and effort seeking even more public funding. In recent years, however, they have come to see themselves as being primarily international in their loyalties and this has enormous ramifications. They want to rise in the international rankings and attract as many students from foreign countries as possible. They want to attract staff from foreign countries, although when one looks at many of the so-called 'international' vice chancellors in Australia they seem to come from England. It is worth noting in this regard, that whereas it is very difficult to be appointed to a French university if one is not French, Australia follows the English model of not being concerned with ensuring that Australian students are generally taught by Australian lecturers.
- One consequence of having 'international universities' is that increasingly the world of academia in Australia is not interested in promoting the study of things Australian. In fact, it is positively disadvantageous to have an Australian focus to one's research, especially in the humanities and social sciences. This is largely because Australian universities make a fetish out of journal rankings. Articles on Australian topics rarely make it into 'top level international journals' and Australian journals are generally not highly ranked. In the cut throat world of academia, especially given the desire by our 'international universities' to appoint foreign staff (in the humanities and social sciences usually England) there is little incentive for academics, especially in the humanities and social sciences, to pursue Australian research projects. In fact, it is even worse. In 2016, I submitted an article that I had co-written on the political memoirs of John Howard and Sir Robert Menzies to the *Australian Journal of Political Science*. The editor, who had studied in England, refused even to send it out to referees to be peer reviewed, telling us that this was a boutique topic of little interest to an international audience. This is another manifestation of the elite idea that Australia has no culture. At least *History Australia* published the article. Historians have a greater Australian focus than political scientists.
- Consequently, in the humanities and social sciences there is a strong argument to be made that Australian universities, funded by Australians, are failing in their responsibilities as national institutions.
- In my lifetime, universities have moved from being institutions with a strong democratic flavour to ones that are run fop down by individuals who see themselves as absolute rulers. Australian universities have increasingly become highly authoritarian institutions. There is clearly a connection between their desire to become international institutions and their increasing authoritarianism. They have moved away from being national institutions,

devoted to the national interest and imbued with the Australian democratic spirit to being something quite different that is inimical to the democratic culture of Australia.

What is to be done?

Josiah Ober (1989) argues that Athenian democracy generally worked because both the Athenian elite and the demos were willing to work together for the good of Athens. Contemporary democracy has come under strain because a growing antagonism has emerged between the educated elites and the demos, both in Australia and in other western countries.

In the Australian case this antagonism has occurred in the context of Australia's unique history, its past as being part of the British empire and its struggle to deal with the vacuum that was created when that empire came to an end. As I have suggested, part of the problem derives from the imperial past when many educated Australians internalised the English view regarding the worthlessness of Australian culture and hence of Australian national identity.

The real issue is how to achieve the sort of balance between elite and demos such as occurred in the world's first democracy. As with Athens, I think it is true to say that the Australian demos has democratic instincts while the Australian educated elite favours oligarchy, in the sense that it thinks that it knows better than the ordinary people.

The following could be considered:

- Both the national and international outlooks have their strong and their weak points. Whereas nationalism encourages an attachment to one's country it can also lead to a narrowness and a distrust of the wider world. Internationalism can expand the vision of an individual but it can also lead to an abstract view of the world in which that individual lacks any real associations with the real world in which they live their daily lives.
- That said, the most important issue regards the value of Australian culture which has been routinely denigrated over an extended period of time. It is the case that it is not only Indigenous Australians who have a rich culture. The descendants of free immigrants and convicts developed their own culture over two hundred years that included much of worth, including its democratic values. For the educated elites to denigrate that culture and dismiss it as racist and sexist is, to say the least, not helpful.
- The question then becomes: how do we avoid conflict between the elites and the demos and encourage a culture of trust between the two? The problem at the moment is that a display of hubris by the educated elites towards the demos is not only considered acceptable but also is too often encouraged. Many members of the educated elite think nothing of expressing their excessive pride by condemning those who do not share their beliefs in an attempt to boost their own sense of self-worth and destroy the self-worth of the demos.
- One thing that is needed is a new account of Australian history that is more positive in its account of the development of Australia and Australian democracy. This has begun to happen. David Kemp's excellent two volumes *The Land of Dreams* (2018) and *A Free Country* (2019) have provided a necessary correction to the very negative views of the Australian past held by large sections of the educated elite thereby allowing us to have a much more balanced and nuanced picture of the Australian past in which freedom and liberty played a large part.
- It cannot be denied that there will always be tensions between different elements of any nation. The issue for any nation is to ensure that those tensions do not become

unmanageable. Recent scholarship on populism indicates that the key factor in the rise of populist attitudes in the West is not being economically 'left behind' but immigration. Immigration matters because individuals come to believe that their culture and way of life is under threat. They do not react well to having their self-worth being trashed. Traditional Australian culture, the culture of the descendants of convicts and free settlers, has as much right to respect as Indigenous culture and the cultures of those peoples who have arrived in more recent times. Unless that is recognised then Australia will remain a divided nation. This means, among other things, a proper appreciation of the role of an international outlook in Australian culture. It should not be seen as something that is in opposition to Australian culture but something that complements it. It is possible to be both a good Australian and a good international citizen.

- Is there any role for government in all of this? I am loath to get governments involved in such matters but I do think that the Commonwealth government has a responsibility for things that are national in nature. It should not be heavy handed but it can encourage.

- As the Commonwealth government funds universities it has a responsibility to ensure that universities exercise their responsibilities as national institutions. Universities have demonstrably failed in this regard in recent times. It should not be the case that the study and research of things Australian are reduced to matters of secondary importance in our tertiary education system. Those in leadership positions at Australian universities, paid by Australians, should be made aware of their responsibilities to Australia, even if they come from some other country. Universities are public institutions, not private companies, and their leaders are paid by Australians and so have their primary responsibility to Australians.

- The same principles should apply to government funding of research. In many areas it is the case that if research on Australian topics is not funded from Australian sources then it will not be funded at all. Australian taxpayers have an expectation that their funds should be expended on matters that have a relevance to them.

- The same is true of all public institutions funded by the Australian taxpayer, such as the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Their primary responsibility is to the Australian people and consequently they have a responsibility to the culture of all the Australian people.

Unfortunately, one can find in both universities and the ABC a hangover of the old English colonialist mentality that was internalised by the elites that there is either no Australian culture or that that culture is worthless. Internationalism is a perfectly legitimate outlook and should be encouraged but not if it takes the form of a revival of old colonialist attitudes. Australian national culture has sometimes been a little rough at the edges but that is no reason for denigrating it because at its core is a genuine democratic sentiment. If Australian democracy is to remain healthy and vigorous there needs to be respect for both Australian national culture and for the wider world of which Australia is part.

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