

Submission to Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy

I am a retired academic, with research expertise in the history of philosophical thought, and an interest in conceptual aspects of issues under current discussion in relation to the Inquiry's terms of reference. I wish to comment especially on changing notions of nationhood and citizenship — their relationship to the conceptualising of cultural identity, and to how we think of Australia's international responsibilities and obligations.

1. Re-imagining Australian Indigenous Presence

Australia is currently undergoing a transformation in attitudes towards the history of the treatment of Indigenous peoples — their place in how national identity is construed; their rights to autonomy, self-determination, and constitutional recognition. New research has greatly extended both the understanding of how long Indigenous peoples have been on this continent, and of the mode of their presence on — and interaction with — their land. It is now widely recognised that they developed a rich civilization involving agriculture, aquaculture, and land management — along with complex systems of governance, communicated through generations. Historical research has also significantly increased understanding of the extent of frontier wars and massacres; of the mistreatment associated with dispossession; and of the continuing trauma which is the legacy of that colonial history.

The facts are now widely known. The assimilation of those facts — with the expansion of imagination it requires — is a slower process. Yet those changes in Australian consciousness are undoubtedly under way — helped by the work of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, and by the flourishing of Indigenous creative writing and artistic communication. It is crucial that this transformation should find reflection in the articulation of Australian nationhood and identity.

I believe that the greatest single contribution to engagement with these emerging issues — so crucial to the future of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians — is a re-thinking of political response to the **Uluru Statement from the Heart**, to embrace a “voice” enshrined in the constitution; truth-telling about the past; and progress towards reconciliation through treaties. Details of all elements of that process should be structured in consultation with Indigenous Australians. The process could itself become a unifying exercise in re-thinking issues of nationhood and national identity.

I suggest, therefore, that the Inquiry give consideration to including in its recommendations an explicit endorsement of the Uluru Statement From the Heart.

2. National Identity and Citizenship

Collective re-imagining of Indigenous presence in Australia — pursued in the spirit of the **Uluru Statement** — could point the way to clearer understanding of Australian “multiculturalism” in a contemporary context.

Rather than attempting to define an essence of “being Australian”, amidst competing “identities”, it may be more constructive to think in terms of hybrid and intersecting narratives, reflecting different histories of presence on the Australian continent.

Against the background of over 60,000 years of Indigenous presence, it becomes of relatively little significance whether one's forebears arrived on the First Fleet or somewhat later. Full recognition of the special status of Australia's “First Peoples” would have to be grounded neither on statistical predominance nor on relative proximity of arrival time to 1788. What is distinctive in the contributions to nationhood of different waves of non-Indigenous migration could then receive rightful recognition, without having to be judged against a posited benchmark of true Australian-ness.

A fresh approach to conceptualising what it is to be Australian — structured around a re-imagining of Indigenous presence — could help by-pass fruitless debate, of the kind mentioned in the Inquiry's Discussion Paper, around the potentially divisive construct of “identity politics”. From the

standpoint of a dominant majority, emphasis on identities may seem an inappropriate disruption of an established order. Yet, from the perspective of disadvantaged minority groups experiencing discrimination, a dismissal of concern with identity can itself be perceived as implicitly re-affirming a structure of power enshrined in the status quo.

“Inclusiveness” can readily become “assimilationist” if it is combined with insistence on a dominant “national identity”. We may be told that we all “belong”; yet it often seems that some are regarded as belonging more than others.

Construing identity in terms of approximation to a pre-defined “essence” may encourage a divisive mentality of “us” and “them”, which can have a corrosive effect also on debates around the treatment of non-citizens. Political rhetoric and popular attitudes around issues of “border protection”, dual citizenship, and criteria for deportation, often involve an implicit appeal to opaque notions of what it is to be — or to be eligible to become — “one of us”.

I suggest, therefore, that the Inquiry might consider whether current conceptualising of Australian “multiculturalism” reflects an inappropriate implicit privileging of some “identities” over others.

3. International Responsibilities and Obligations

A re-imagining of “nationhood” and “national identity” might also facilitate insight into the ways in which “national interest” increasingly demands that we think *globally*, beyond pre-occupations with sharp demarcations between “us” and “them”.

Some of the most pressing problems currently facing nations demand solutions that seem to lie beyond the capacities of individual “nation states”. That dilemma is apparent in the interconnected challenges of climate change and current mass movements of people. Many Australians doubt that our politicians are sufficiently engaged with the global challenges of climate change. And our refugee and asylum seeker policies have repeatedly attracted criticism from international authorities and organisations. Those policies often seem to prioritise concern with perceived threats to our own borders over collaboration in initiatives such as the Global Compacts on Migration and on Refugees — designed to provide safe pathways to safety or resettlement, while achieving more equitable sharing of responsibilities.

In this context, therefore, I suggest that it is appropriate for the Inquiry to reflect on the implications of our ways of thinking of “national identity” for how we construe “national interest” and its relations to international responsibilities and commitments.

I am grateful for being given the opportunity to participate in the consultation processes of this Inquiry.

Genevieve Lloyd
Emeritus Professor in Philosophy and Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities