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Which Truth?

Australian identity — culture and politics

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*Conflicting images of
Australia are being presented
to the world.*

Is it true to say that Australia is a tolerant, multicultural and open society? Or does it retain vestiges of a past steeped in the idea of a 'white Australia'? Or is there truth in both images of the country? Perhaps the truth is that the image the nation wishes to portray is the former while there is another truth tucked away in the minds of many.

The image of Australian culture as represented in the international arena takes two forms: that of high culture, and the culture of everyday life. Cultural agreements between a number of countries emphasise the exchange of cultural activities which are generally referred to as 'high culture,' such as the visual and performing arts. The culture of everyday life is played out through the media and provides insight into aspects of government and our politicians. A critical examination of the images of Australian culture in its various guises indicates that the messages an international audience may receive are very mixed indeed.

For many years Australia has been a party to treaties which aim to further develop a mutual understanding of the culture of a number of our near neighbours.¹ For example, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have entered into these bipartisan agreements with Australia to exchange ideas on culture and foster a greater understanding between countries. The Singapore–Australia Treaty (Australian Treaty Series 1975 No 34) stresses in its preamble that our history and geographic closeness provide the opportunity to learn from each other. Article 1 of the treaty states:

Each Government shall undertake to promote understanding in its country of the history, culture, institutions and general way of life of the other country especially by means of

- (a) books, periodicals and other publications;
- (b) lectures, seminars, concerts and the performing arts;
- (c) fine arts, crafts and other cultural exhibitions;
- (d) radio, television, films, gramophone records, tapes and other mechanical means.

Article 3 of the treaty further provides that:

The two governments shall encourage cooperation between the press, radio and television services of the respective countries.

The treaty with Indonesia incorporates similar sentiments. The cultural treaty between Australia and Indonesia pre-dates the Singapore treaty by a number of years, yet the idea of the exchange of cultural ideas being beneficial for both Indonesia and Australia was established in formal agreements in 1968 when Australia and Indonesia formed a cultural agreement (Australia Treaty Series 1968 No 12)

Article 2 of this treaty states:

Each government shall undertake to promote understanding in its country of the history, culture, institutions, and general way of life of the other.

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Article 4 states:

The two governments shall encourage cooperation between the press, radio and television services of the two countries in fields within the scope of the agreement.

The importance of the exchange of cultural images and ideas between countries has long been seen as an important diplomatic activity which helps to foster positive relations for trade and foreign affairs. Raising cultural profiles in this way is therefore nothing new. What has changed, however, is the perceived need for a 'new' cultural identity for Australia in the current times. During the 1990s there was a deliberate focus by government on raising the profile of Australia's national identity through a much more vigorous promotion of Australian culture. The promotion of a 'new Australia' continues.

This article is concerned with the way in which the arts are used to present our cultural image overseas, and questions whether this image is in conflict with other images of Australia such as those depicted in media coverage of the nation's affairs. For example, legislation such as the *Migration Amendment (Excision from Migration Zone) Act 2001* which excised Cocos Island, Christmas Island, Ashmore Reef and Cartier Reef from Australia's migration zone has been designed to send a very clear message about the government's policy with respect to asylum seekers. Recently the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Mr Philip Ruddock, announced new regulations to further extend the area of excised places from the migration zone.² There has been considerable international media coverage of the manner in which Australia has dealt with asylum seekers. The response from government has been that Australia does not tolerate 'illegal' behaviour from asylum seekers and will undertake all necessary measures to ensure that Australia is not seen as a favourable destination for people deemed to fit this category. The excision of certain Australian territory from the migration zone is part of this approach.

Such action raises many questions about Australia's identity. There is a direct contrast between the image of a tolerant, multicultural, society which is non-racist and wants reconciliation with the original inhabitants of the country and other images being presented both at a government and popular level in the country's dealings with refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Mackay argues that Australia's pre-occupation with the redefinition of its national identity is no different to that of other countries undergoing socio-economic change.³ It was during a time of major restructuring in the 1990s when the Keating Labor government promoted the idea that Australia would benefit from the introduction of a national cultural policy. A committee was formed in 1992 to consider ways of better promoting an image of a contemporary Australian culture. This group advised on the formulation of a Commonwealth cultural policy and as a result the *Creative Nation* document was published in 1994. The preamble of that document covers three broad areas: the future of Australian culture; what Australian culture is; and a charter of cultural rights. The need to protect and nurture Australian culture is made clear at the beginning of the document:

What is distinctively Australian about our culture is under assault from homogenised international mass culture.

Ironically, our culture has never been more vital than it is now. At every level of society, Australians are engaged in cultural activities that are helping to re-invent the national identity, and

most Australians would agree on the need to enhance and enrich our culture. To achieve this, cultural policy must enter the mainstream of federal policy making.⁴

A cultural policy which actively seeks to project a particular image of a country requires considerable knowledge of how the country is perceived by those other countries within the global marketplace.

The Keating government, in recognising the competing images of Australia that might be portrayed, did much to promote the importance of strengthening ties between Australia and South East Asia. The close geographic location to a number of countries was emphasised as being an important aspect of developing better ties economically and politically. An image of a multicultural Australia with its diverse Asian population was also one which was portrayed as being ripe for greater cultural exchange between this country and other countries in the region.

In spite of these Federal Labor government attempts at promoting a positive cultural image of Australia, Alison Broinowski argued during 1993 that long standing negative images of Australia had not been dispelled and would take considerable effort to eradicate. She suggested that although the White Australia Policy officially ran from 1968 to 1975, many neighbouring countries still think of Australia in terms of a 'white Australia'. She further suggests that this is so because of the negative messages that are sometimes still perpetuated by politicians and cites the following example:⁵

In 1998 for instance, the statements made by John Howard, [the then] Leader of the Federal opposition, about Asian immigration, and repeated since, were reported on the front pages of Hong Kong newspapers. This only served to convince people that Australians had, in fact, not changed their attitudes or policies. The unspoken belief remains that with a change of government or a change of political emphasis, these views will revive.⁶

The election and subsequent re-election of the Howard government might suggest that Broinowski's comments back in 1993 have come to bear fruit. The government has indeed changed its political emphasis in some areas of policy making to the detriment some may argue, of the positive cultural image which some of its own departments have worked tirelessly to promote. However, the government alone cannot take full responsibility for the change in political emphasis. Popular attitudes have been the guide for change in government policy. The representation of an Australian national identity is, therefore, anything but a straightforward exercise. As Milner says:

Cultures are constantly changing, being re-shaped and constructed, they are even invented, sometimes deliberately and sometimes by accident. In a single society there are often competing cultures, and in certain cases competing perceptions of one culture.⁷

That there has been a concerted effort by government to foster a particular image of an Australian national identity through increased cultural activity both here and overseas in recent years is not to be questioned. Major events such as the Olympic games have been highly successful at cultivating a particular image of Australia as a young, vibrant and tolerant country.

The Sydney Olympics and images of national identity

The opening and closing ceremonies of the Sydney Olympics have been hailed as among the most successful

cultural promotions Australia has ever undertaken. Ric Birch, the Olympic ceremonies organiser has said in an interview that the ceremonies were never going to be a political statement but always a theatrical statement. The theme of reconciliation he maintained, was not planned as such but rather evolved:

I mean, by and large — and I wouldn't want to speak on behalf of the rest of the team — but by and large, I think it's fair to say that people involved in the creative arts tend to be more on the liberal side of politics and I guess working as a team we all had a similar view of Australia.⁸

The images of Australia as presented at the Olympics did portray a liberal Australia in which reconciliation was perceived as timely. The message was one of a compassionate people living in a 'new mature Australia' ready and willing to accept the Aboriginal people as original inhabitants of the country. It was a country which was ready as a whole to say sorry for the past. Of course the political reality is far more complex. The government and people of Australia have still not found a way for the nation as a whole to say sorry.

Major newspapers such as the *Australian* and the *Age* each produced a special Olympic colour magazine. The comments by selected writers in each issue discussed the image of an Australian national identity as presented to the global market. The different perceptions of the two main writers capture a range of the cultural images of 'new Australia'.

Phillip Knightley commenting in the *Age* thought that the games were a glowing success in promoting a country which many people in the rest of the world knew very little about. He maintained that ignorance of the new Australia was pretty much the status quo. His comments will have a familiar ring for anyone who has been to the United States in recent years. He said:

The ignorance of modern Australia was widespread. I have a relative who works for an American travel agency that specialises in tours of Australia. Before the Games, she told me that at least once a week Americans would call to say they'd love to visit Australia but were reluctant because they didn't speak German.⁹

His overall summary of the Sydney Olympics and the message it sent to the rest of the global market place was succinct:

The bottom line? Hundreds of thousands of overseas athletes and spectators in Australia, and billions more watching television, have learnt a lot about 'new' Australia, including the desire of the people (if not yet the government) to put things right with the Aborigines.¹⁰

Knightley's comments in presenting the Howard government to be entirely at fault are implausible. The image may well have provided much feeling of goodwill and generosity at the time, but two years later we have seen little motivation 'to put things right with the Aborigines'. The small groups of citizens campaigning for reconciliation do not appear to represent popular attitudes. The general level of health, housing and education of much of the Aboriginal population still leaves much to be desired and reconciliation at a formal level seems no closer.

David Williamson's article for the *Weekend Australian* contrasts well with that of Knightley. His comments encapsulate the self-doubt that is said to exist in the Australian psyche.¹¹

Non-Aboriginal Australia is a young nation without a long history of historical and cultural achievement from which to

draw self esteem. We have no Shakespeares or Leonardo da Vincis or Alexander the Greats. Our convict origins and our uneasiness at our geographical location so far away from the Europe most of us relate to, make us somewhat a cot case on the scale of national paranoia. And the flip side to our paranoid insecurity is an ugly cynical truculence born out of our English working class origins ...¹²

Williamson puts these comments into the context of the games and how the opening and closing ceremonies did much to alleviate the common view of a nation of people suffering from cultural cringe. His comments on the presentation of Aboriginal culture have much significance for where we as a nation find ourselves today. The images of a nation ready for reconciliation were powerful indeed. But how truthful was the message? Williamson's comments made two years ago have even more significance today:

The truth is that this nation, which was once the social laboratory of the world, is now in the hands of a timid and regressive government. And we often listen to that government.¹³

It is also the case that the government listens to the people. Polling surveys have indicated over a long period of time that there is still much residual racism in the country and the fear of the 'other' is still strong in popular opinion. The last election played on some of these fears quite successfully. The protection of our shores from the unknown peril of asylum seekers was a political ploy used by both major parties.

Over the past two years, the contradictory messages of Australian national identity have become even further removed from one another. Positive images continue to be portrayed overseas through the visual and performing arts. One such event took place earlier this year. Australia was the feature country at a large European art fair. The Australia Council (which is the art funding and advisory body for the federal government) sponsored Australia at ARCO 2002 as one of its major projects for the year.

ARCO and national identity

The ARCO fair was held in Madrid, Spain between 13 and 19 February 2002. The catalogue produced for the show makes for fascinating reading. It presents a very particular image of an Australia which is very multicultural and alive with contemporary art.

When using the term 'Australians' it is important to note the degree to which Australia is a melting pot of disparate cultures, races and creeds. The Australian population is a dazzling mix of Indigenous Aborigines and immigrants from around the globe. Australian society is among the most liberal and open on the planet, with the direct result that diverse cultural backgrounds are to a large degree a part of contemporary Australian culture.¹⁴

The unique aspects of Australian culture are seen to be reflected in the multicultural arts community on the one hand and the stereotype of the 'rugged individual' on the other.

Like the platypus the Australian art world is an odd mix of things. While geographically remote, that distance tends to create an immense hunger in most artists who are starved of the daily experience of traditional western or eastern culture ... these artists range in cultural background from Aboriginal to Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Chinese, Greek, Italian, Spanish, and all corners of the globe — however, they are distinctly Australian. There is no central fashion here. Australia is renowned as a land of irreverent and rugged individualism. The image becomes a truism when one scans the work of this strange mob from down under.¹⁵

The image being presented here is consistent with the image being cultivated through the Australia International Cultural Council. The Council was formed in 1998 by Alexander Downer, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, with the aim of implementing a three-year strategy to:

project Australia as a democratic, tolerant, vibrant, innovative and creative nation, with a rich and diverse culture — an image that advances our foreign and trade policy interests, and promotes the export of Australian cultural products.¹⁶

Is this image being cultivated any more than an idea of how we would like the rest of the world to see us. And how truthful is it really? Is current political activity undermining this image or do we simply accept that the ugly side of an Australian national identity may have more truth to it than we care to admit to ourselves?

Current government policy and a tarnished truth

Alongside government activity to promote the image of a new Australia, recent political events have also received much media attention which presents Australian national identity in a somewhat different light. The ongoing issue with the arrival and detaining of asylum seekers to this country has presented quite a conflicting image to that which was presented at the Olympics.

Asylum seekers

The Tampa crisis was broadcast widely overseas. Much of the coverage showed Australia as a country willing to take a very hard line towards asylum seekers from war-torn countries.¹⁷ The government's approach to dealing with asylum seekers has come under much scrutiny and criticism from some quarters. A related issue raises further concerns about the manner in which asylum seekers have been portrayed. Allegations made by the government about asylum seekers throwing their children over board proved to be false, but may well have been a highly successful political ploy resulting in demonising the asylum seeking parents and further legitimating the government's hard line approach.

Yet another related issue, with a tragic outcome, was the loss of 353 passengers who drowned at sea between Java and Christmas Island during October 2001. The passengers embarking on the journey numbered 397, vastly excessive for the size of the boat. They were reportedly on their way to Christmas Island to seek asylum within Australia. Testimony to a Senate inquiry into this issue has raised serious concerns about the information available on the state of the vessel and the inadequate action of the government at the time.

Robert Manne comments that:

In the history of our callous indifference to Middle Eastern asylum seekers, no single fact is more disturbing than the passivity of the Australian defence force to the dangers facing 400 fellow human beings in the three days between the morning of October 20 and the morning of October 23, when the anticipated news of 353 deaths finally arrived.¹⁸

The manner in which asylum seekers have been detained and treated has also received considerable press coverage. Some detainees have gone on hunger strikes and have sewn their lips together as a form of protest at the conditions in which they have been held. Small neighbouring countries such as Nauru have agreed to take asylum seekers on the basis that they would be financially compensated for housing the detainees.

The president of Nauru has presented another side to the story. He is quoted as saying that 'Australia's Pacific solution is Nauru's Pacific nightmare'. He complained that the \$30 million Australia had promised in aid had not come through, and said his people were demanding to know just how long they would have to endure the pressures on island infrastructure created by the two detention centres.¹⁹

The majority of detained asylum seekers are either from Afghan or Iraq where the political situation raises serious questions about the return of many of the detainees to their own country. Although there have been a number of protests about the treatment of asylum seekers, it would appear that the government's hard line has been very popular within Australia. This is not the case, however, with countries such as Spain and Britain that have chosen to find a more humane way to deal with asylum seekers.²⁰

The Prime Minister's visit to the United States

Following the Prime Minister's recent visit to the United States criticism from the Australian press has been directed at the amount of support the Prime Minister has pledged Australia will give to the United States in its war against terrorism. This is because of the broad sweeping nature of retaliation suggested by President Bush. The President has been quoted as saying:

New threats require new thinking. Deterrence, the promise of massive retaliation against nations, means nothing against the shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies.²¹

The Prime Minister has committed Australians to following in the footsteps of the United States, it seems, without adequate consideration for the difficulties which might ensue from such avid support of Bush's approach to dealing with terrorism. Australia's pledged support to the United States depicts a country which seems to have given little thought to its immediate neighbours and the possible implications of such a pledge. Both Indonesia and Malaysia have significant Muslim populations which may well become the target for pre-emptive strikes in the war against terrorism. The image of Australia presented to our nearest neighbours may well be perceived as something far different from that which is being perpetuated through the visual and performing arts overseas.

Which truth?

Is the new Australia the liberal, open, democratic, multicultural Australia it presents itself as being through various cultural promotions? Or is it a country which is gradually becoming more restrictive in its approaches to immigrants, less tolerant of difference and lacking compassion for those who seek to find solace within our shores? The contradiction between the cultural image we are trying to promote abroad and the kinds of actions and comments that the government is engaging in at present seems to be dominated by a political rhetoric that shows Australia in a less than flattering light.

The images simply do not reflect the reality. The Sydney Olympic Games were a resounding success in pushing a particular image. The Australia International Cultural Council, the Australia Council and Asialink all continue to work towards a better relationship between our neighbours and ourselves.

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argued that the distillation of legal principles which apply only to married women can be explained by the law's general tendency to keep women, and in particular married women as separate, as the 'other' in law. By doing this, law retains its purity and rationality. The outcome of these factors for wives is simple, they remain locked in a particular frame of reference and invisible in others.

I have argued that while the above is true of law in general it is more true in commercial law because the foundational principles of commercial law are the very same as those which are preferred by, and underpin the law in general.

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Where is the Truth? Recent activity might suggest that memories of the White Australia Policy are still a long way from being eradicated by our nearest neighbours. Ultimately it may not be possible to speak of 'the truth', but rather competing truths being expressed through competing images. It is certainly true to say that the government of the day has had considerable community support over its tough stance on asylum seekers. However, it is equally true that many who have migrated to Australia have sought to settle here on the basis that there is substance to the idea that we are a tolerant, multicultural society. This latter image is the 'truth' being represented through cultural events both here and overseas, but is this the whole truth? How Australia is really perceived by our nearest neighbours will depend on the truth of our actions not just words and images.

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