



Australia Day message to staff

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The Australian National Character: Shaped in the Sunburnt Country

Deeply fixed in the Australian national character are twin traits of independence and mateship, whereby a free-spirited people form a powerful collective which comes together unhesitatingly in times of strife, such as we are seeing during this summer of fire.

On the occasion of Australia Day 2017, I wrote the following about our national character:

As our forebears grappled with an unfamiliar land, and built a nation, they created a cultural system of norms, codes of behaviour and language (including slang). A recognisable sensibility was seared into our national character between European settlement and the terrible crucible of the Great War. Australians...knew and sensed that social acceptance and approval flowed from the simple traits of our national character - do your job well; avoid pomposity and excessive deference; crack a joke and share a laugh...be practical and utilitarian in your outlook; give everyone a 'fair go', irrespective of social 'rank' and standing; and help your mate.

This national character had been formed in part through encounters with the land, as those who settled the vast land sought to come to terms with isolation and an arid interior.

Many years ago, Russel Ward in his classic work of Australian history *The Australian Legend* (published in 1958) sought to explain the development of the Australian self-image. Ward wrote of the "Australian Legend", which was grounded in our colonial era, the Federation period, and the Great War and its aftermath. This self-image was generated by the drovers, shearers, stockmen, station hands, farm workers, and miners, who were scattered across the vast outback in those early days.

It was transmitted through the networks and platforms of the day – newspapers, journals (such as the now defunct *The Bulletin*), novels, short stories, and poems. Impressionist painters of bush scenes and landscapes played their part. Folklore was passed through stories and "yarns", songs and ballads, as well as during the course of the multitude of personal encounters that occurred in the bush, the station, the town, the mine, and the district church. This self-image moved from the interior to the cities, where most people in fact lived, until it became pervasive.

Of course, the Australian Legend continued to evolve, not least in the trenches of Gallipoli and the Western Front, the muddy trails of Kokoda, and in the makeshift hospitals of the Burma Railway. It was on display on construction sites, in factories and on the dockside, on sporting ovals and

pitches, and of course in the public bars, clubs and other social venues across the land. Later, in the 1970s, it was even mobilised to sell products, when the Mojo method burst on the scene: irreverent TV advertisements, with accompanying jingles which were constructed in the Australian idiom and accent – as distinct from the clipped and English imitating voices typically heard on Australian television before that time.

Today, the Australian Legend lives on, as Australians come together to confront an old foe - fire. We are staring at the face of the Australian Legend when we look at the weary and grimy faces of the men and women of our rural fire services on the fire grounds, faces that Banjo Paterson would have immortalised in verse and Frederick McCubbin on canvas.

The Australian Legend was and remains no doubt a mythologised self-image. That is the point of a national legend – it is a people's idea of itself, a self-consciousness formed over time. It is the story of what we like ideally to believe about ourselves. A national identity sustains in each generation common outlooks, understandings, norms, and beliefs which indicate and signify what is to be valued, and what is to be imagined, about a national story. As we tell these stories, a shared idea of ourselves emerges, which is conveyed and reconveyed through the years. In anthropological terms, most of us are genuinely connected to several hundred people at most. National identity is a vehicle by which we connect to millions of compatriots beyond our immediate social networks, most of whom we will never meet.

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We see ourselves as practical, self-reliant and resilient; inventive and willing to improvise; orientated to action, rather than philosophy and theory (although the universe's secrets and eternal mysteries have been solved by many an Australian late at night around the camp fire or in the front bar – if only they could remember the answers the next morning...). We are willing to work hard – when it is worth our while, and with good cause. We get the job done, without fuss. We are scornful of pretence and affectation; irreverent and gregarious; loyal to mates and egalitarian, in the land of the Fair Go. We are not afraid to claim a right but are equally willing to share a bounty. We value reward for hard work and enterprise. We cherish independence and equality of opportunity, seeing no contradiction between Liberty and Equality.

We value our space, love our home, and cherish solitude and privacy when that suits. We like to do as we please, within the law. Mercifully, our reverence for the outlaw expresses itself in suspicion of persons in authority but we tend to be obedient to impersonal authority where we can see that rules are being commonly observed, binding each and all. Helping out a mate? That arose no doubt from the sparseness and isolation which led the early settlers to depend on one another. In a harsh land, new forms of social obligation and expectation emerged – especially in the face of distance, drought, fire, storm and flood.

In fact, early isolation and hardship engendered those twin tendencies - individualistic and communitarian at the same time – which were blended and fused in the national character. Another historian, Keith Hancock, explained this duality when he wrote a one volume history of *Australia* (1930). Australians possessed, he said, a thoroughly utilitarian view of the State – its function being to maximize the greatest level of happiness for the greatest number. Settlement and migration had scattered the settlers across a wide land, and bonded them into a powerful collective of free individuals, with the State in Australia being the collective vehicle for effective cooperation.

Hancock saw no contradiction between Australian individualism and reliance upon the collective to maximize public utility.

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Some argue that human values are universal and human nature is constant. This is perhaps so. We are all joined in a common humanity. Hunger is hunger, and there are other deep biological constants. For all that, how is it that we know instinctively when we are in Australia, and in the company of Australians? In Italy, with Italians? In Vietnam, with Vietnamese?

If land, time, and climate do not shape a people over the long duration of history, how might we otherwise account for national differences? Conduct this thought experiment: unlike the American frontier experience, Australia's settlers did not have the benefit of rich soil, teeming forests, high mountain ranges and wide inland rivers. Imagine if after 1788 we had become a second America – settling a land able to sustain 100 million, or more. Applying Frederick Jackson Turner's famous thesis of the significance of the frontier in American history, surely we would today be describing a country with a very different self-image, and with a different place and role in the world.

Australia as it was formed became proof that nurture trumps nature in social character formation. Unburdened by old world authority structures and social practices, by bonds of deference, class and privilege, our national story took on its own distinct shape within a few decades of the settlement that is marked by Australia Day. Free settlers, emancipated convicts, soldiers, officials, and native-born Australians all started to think of themselves as a people in the early 19th Century, with different sensibilities and a new outlook on how best to organise society and give effect to government. The transportation of "undesirables" to a place of systematic oppression and terror (the "Fatal Shore" thesis) in fact brought forth a new world which was marked by a democratic temperament and an egalitarian social outlook.

It helped of course that we had a continent of our own, sheltered by the sea, and protected by the Empire. We had enough confidence to choose quite consciously freedom and independence within our land, while at the same time being determined to remain within the Empire. This new people was vitally interested in the liberal political and constitutional ideas that were emerging in Britain at the time. Our forebears drew on these ideas, especially as they related to democratic reform. The Australian dual focus on individual liberty and equality of opportunity was seen in the building of the national institutions of government, which culminated in Federation on 1 January 1901. On 26 January 1788, the best of the Enlightenment and the core ideas of political liberty arrived with the Fleet, and within a little over a century these ideas were fashioned into those institutions.

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Some argue that the Australian Legend is outmoded and overly-mythologised, a project of male-bonding amongst White Anglo Men. I contend that the values of this older Australia continue to speak to us today and can be adapted and mobilised effectively in an era of global disruption and social dislocation. They can be made to transcend ethnicity, class, gender, and circumstance otherwise. To apply the religious lens, the values that are intrinsic to the Australian national character can be lived equally and authentically by Christian, Muslim, Jew, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, atheist, agnostic or other.

Of course, today Australia is a radically different place, as compared to the Australia described by Ward and Hancock. We hardly need to spell out the demographic changes, the passing of Anglo Australia, urbanisation, the technology which has largely mastered distance and isolation, the increased connectivity and engagement with the world, and so much more besides. Today's Australia would be unrecognisable to the bush poets – and yet would we wager against a new Banjo Paterson finding inspiration to pen a verse about a modern Man, or Woman, from Snowy River?

Today's Australian Legend should of course be broadened to include the story of the Indigenous peoples of Australia, and their custodianship of the land. There is much, for instance, to be learned from that tradition in terms of fire management and care of the land. Women need to be included, as too should those Australians who have come from lands beyond the Anglo-Celtic world of the Australian Legend. Other elements should be retired from the Legend – excessive and addictive drinking, for instance, is nothing to be celebrated, knowing what we know today about physical and mental health. While the content and forms of the Australian Legend will always need to evolve and be cast more widely, its core claims – and especially the twin commitments to freedom and collective purpose; individualism and mateship – should always remain central to who we are.

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In *My Country* (1911), Dorothea Mackellar invoked in verse how Australians had been shaped by a land which was so very different from that of England – the land of “green and shaded lanes”. By contrast, Mackellar, loved “a sunburnt country // a land of sweeping plains // of ragged mountain ranges // of droughts and flooding rains”. Australia was in her poem a land of both beauty and terror.

It is fitting today that we should recall the largely unremembered fifth stanza:

Core of my heart, my country!
Land of the Rainbow Gold,
For flood and fire and famine,
She pays us back threefold –
Over the thirsty paddocks,
Watch, after many days,
The filmy veil of greenness
That thickens as we gaze.

As we celebrate Australia Day, and welcome our newest citizens, let us draw on the strength of our national character to see us through once again to the better days that our land and providence have always provided.