

Today, all over the country, people are celebrating Australia Day – in pubs and clubs, with barbeques and cricket matches, citizenship ceremonies and games of two-up.

But what are we celebrating? What does it mean to be “Australian”? For as long as I can remember, Australians have been struggling to define an “Australian Identity”.

From time to time individual voices have sounded out and the elusive “identity” seemed within reach: the bush ballads of Banjo Patterson, the larrikin stirring of Henry Lawson, the grasp of country expressed by Mary Gilmore, Miles Franklin, Judith Wright; the searing images of Sid Nolan and Arthur Boyd; the outrageous laughter of Roy Rene and Barry Humphries – all of these are recognisable components of what we might dub “The Australian character” – things that are uniquely ours, that no other country can emulate or take away from us.

Yet the “Australian Identity” is always in a state of flux, especially as newcomers from various parts of Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East add new strands to the rich tapestry of our nation.

Australia has changed a lot since I was a kid, in many ways for the better. I grew up in Newcastle and Maitland in the Hunter Valley; and looking back, I’m surprised how much of my life was governed by prejudice. My family’s background was Irish working-class and the bitter memories of sectarianism still tainted the air. Ecunism hadn’t been invented. We didn’t know any Protestants,

(not to talk to), “mixed” marriages, i.e. marriages between Catholics and Protestants, were frowned upon and filled with obstacles. Divorce was a scandal, young unmarried women who fell pregnant usually had their babies taken away from them, and my old man reckoned his career in the Bank had been stymied by the Masons.

My family were all decent, kind and generous people, but prejudice also coloured our perception of foreigners. Australia in the early fifties was experiencing its first big influx of non-English speaking Europeans – refugees from Nazism and Communism and workers for the Snowy Mountains Scheme.

A lot of these foreigners (Czechs, Poles, Hungarians, Italians) lived in the dismal refugee camps composed of metallic Nissen huts and the kids went to my school where they were regarded with varying degrees of suspicion, mockery and condescension. Their accents were weird, so were their school lunches. They seemed generally out of sync with the local rhythm of life – until, that is, they started leaving us for dead at maths and on the footy field.

They were generally referred to as migrants or reffos – sometimes as Balts, Ities, or Krauts. Anyone with dark skin was a coolie. Some bureaucrat somewhere tried to soften the edges by inventing the sympathetic name “New Australians”, but in time this too became a derogatory term: “There’s a funny smell – must be those New Australians across the street.”

At least most of them were Catholic so that helped speed up their acceptance, especially when we were regaled from the pulpit with tales of the horrors of atheistic Communism and the sufferings of Cardinal Mindzenty.

The Greeks were a bit harder to accept because they were Orthodox, didn't recognise The Pope and therefore had Buckley's of getting into Heaven. But their milk bars and fish-and-chips rapidly became iconic and earned them a place in the sun.

Wave after wave of immigrants to these shores experienced the same pattern of distrust, scorn and occasional aggression until they were reluctantly absorbed into the mainstream, whether they were ten-pound Poms, Chinese, Vietnamese, Turks or Lebanese.

When Newcastle opened its first Chinese restaurant, people in the street stood with their noses pressed against the glass to watch people eating with chopsticks – a bizarre and amusing spectacle. My Aunty Joan was the flighty one of the family and when she announced she was going to the Chinese restaurant, our reaction was one of scorn and resentment: "She always has to be different – Why's she want to waste her money eating that muck? I suppose lamb chops and peas aren't good enough for her." When Aunty came home we all gathered around to ask what she'd eaten; and when she said "Bird's nest soup" we laughed ourselves silly – she'd obviously totally flipped her lid.

Fifty years on Australia feels like a very different place – at least most of it does. Prejudice of course is always with us. It is a fact of life and is born of fear and

ignorance. It continues to be re-born in different guises and to pop up in the most unexpected places. But it will continue to flourish, like a virus, whenever fear and ignorance have a stranglehold.

For the most part the policies of multiculturalism in Australia have been a triumphant success and set an example to the rest of the world. Multiculturalism goes far beyond the facile description of "eating souvlaki and dancing to Zorba". But cuisine does play an important role in inter-racial exchange.

I travel quite a bit and find that in Italy I can eat Italian food and Spanish food in Spain. There isn't much else on offer. The menu is even more limited in Japan, China and Indonesia. But for twenty-eight years I lived in Surry Hills, a rather scruffy and unremarkable inner-Sydney suburb. I could walk around the corner into Cleveland or Bourke Street and within a couple of blocks have my choice of restaurants: Greek, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Lebanese, Turkish, Indian, Thai, Malaysian, Indonesian, Moroccan, Yugoslavian, Russian or South American.

A similar variety could be found in most inner-city suburbs around Australia. After a while, you don't notice what language people are speaking, what they're wearing, where they worship. They are simply the neighbours. Racial tension? Forget about it. They are all happily integrated, living their own lives according to their own cultures, side by side all over the country.

So what about the so-called "race riots" in Cronulla recently? Don't they prove the failure of multiculturalism? On the contrary, they are a measure of its

success, demonstrating that violence will occur in an area that is homogenous, dominated by one ethnic group and resistant to outsiders coming in. Given my own Celtic heritage I was embarrassed to see that the majority of youths arrested for assault and affray bore names that were Irish.

The factors behind the Cronulla riots were the obverse of multiculturalism. They have their roots in the marginalisation of and discrimination against a particular ethnic group which suffers high youth unemployment and a feeling of disenfranchisement which leads inevitably to resentment and violence.

The most obvious and immediate answer to the problem is education, from an early age, about the cultures, beliefs, and traditions of our fellow Australians whatever their background. Travel isn't enough. It's supposed to broaden the mind but often ends up as simply a shopping expedition, taking snaps at a couple of tourist spots and staying at the local Hilton or getting trashed at nightclubs on the beach. Travel without curiosity or knowledge of what you're looking at doesn't do much for an appreciation of otherness.

First and foremost we should learn more about our indigenous people... How many of us here know the names of the aboriginal clans and tribes, their languages, where they lived and what happened to them?

Because they never developed writing but depended on a tradition of oral history, music and dance, much of this information has been lost. It's an urgent priority to record what we can of aboriginal oral history and language before it disappears forever.

Fortunately we do have a fabulous heritage of indigenous painting and visual art.

Take a look at a collection such as the one at the Ian Potter Gallery in Federation Square. Take time to read the commentaries, and you'll find these works are a lot more than decorative wall-hangings. They are replete with symbolism, metaphor and spirituality which tell us an enormous amount about the cultures that produced them and still flourish in Australia today. They are, besides, among the most sophisticated and imaginative works of art produced by humankind.

The benefits of multiculturalism in Australia go way beyond an interesting and varied cuisine. Newcomers to Australia have given us leaders in business, sport, science and medicine as well as in art, music, literature and dance and an exciting variety of carnivals, festivals and cultural celebrations. But do we all share common values – and what are they?

One Australian academic has described our core values as egalitarianism, fairness, democracy and freedom. So how do we measure up today?

Blind Freddie could tell you that egalitarianism is much more of an ideal than a reality. We are at present witnessing a widening gap between the haves and have-nots with the have-nots feeling increasingly neglected and marginalised. We are developing an unhealthy adulation of wealth and power no matter how they are accrued or how they are deployed. The promise of equal opportunity to

rise to the top remains a mockery for those caught up in cycles of poverty and unemployment.

As for fairness, have a talk to those unfortunates who have been held for years in detention centres or suffered the vagaries of the Department of Immigration. When did that compassionate term “asylum seekers” become a term of abuse? We seem to have let our guard slip in giving everybody a fair hearing and a fair go.

Democracy and freedom are fine words and dear to the heart of every Australian; so we should remain acutely aware of the mixed feelings among citizens of all political persuasions involving concerning aspects of recent legislation workplace reform, changes to the unfair dismissal laws and legislation against “sedition”.

Egalitarianism, fairness, democracy and freedom are aspirations to be striven for rather than qualities we already happen to possess simply because we are Australian.

Many of the blemishes on our current society (such as the ones I have already cited – marginalising of ethnic groups, harsh treatment of refugees, clamping down on freedom of speech) are born out of fear. And if we are to flourish and progress we can't afford to be a fearful nation. In 1939 Franklin D. Roosevelt in his inaugural speech to the American people said “We have nothing to fear but fear itself” and these are words we could take to heart today. What are we afraid of?

*The other, aliens, foreigners – until we get know them and find they are just like us.

*The dark side of our story – our past mistakes and atrocities. There has been a racist strain in this country from the beginning, as there is in any country, and we should have the courage to own up to it. We had a White Australia Policy until the early 1970s and one of our leading publications, The Bulletin, ran as its motto “Australia for the White Man.” One of its most distinguished contributors, Norman Lindsay, drew vile caricatures of orientals to accompany The Bulletin’s warnings against “They Yellow Peril”. We must acknowledge the massacres and mistreatment of our indigenous people, especially in Tasmania; the lynching of Chinese miners at Lambing Flats; the racist jokes and prejudices heard in pubs and work-places around Australia every day of the week. Let’s own up to our faults, our mistakes and our past wrongs and then move on... Let’s not be afraid to say “Sorry”...

*We are frightened of new ideas, challenges to the status quo. We’re frightened of intellectuals and critics who point out our flaws. Here, as in Britain and the U.S., there is a resentment and suspicion of intellectuals you don’t find in Europe or Asia. The very word “intellectual” is often used derogatively and we’ve developed a Tall Poppy syndrome to keep them in their place.

*We’re frightened of change, of letting go, of being ourselves. We cling with one hand to the nostalgia of British Empire and with the other we cling to the U.S. alliance, the super-power for whom we are a self-proclaimed “deputy sheriff”.

Past generations of Australians had a nostalgia for the British Empire and its royal family. This was understandable in that so many of us were descended from British emigrants. We felt an affinity with the British based on our comradeship in two world wars, the poems we learned at school and the relentless propaganda of the Women's Weekly.

New generations of Anglo-Australians feel no such affinity or nostalgia. To them, as to young Australians from Asian, European or Middle-Eastern backgrounds, Britain is a cold little island a long way away and its royals no more than visitors who drop in occasionally to cut a ribbon or watch a horse-race. Britain, its way of life, its royal family are of little interest to the great majority of Australians. For myself, being one of that generation who learned Keats and Shelly at school and grew up with the forelock-tugging cringe of the Women's Weekly, I remain something of an anglophile with a degree of respect for those royals who do their job with dignity and integrity.

But that doesn't mean I want them to "reign over us" any more than I want King Juan Carlos or Emperor Akahito as my head of state, much as I love Spain and Japan.

We are a nation of many colours, creeds and practices. What can unite us?

We shall never achieve a uniqueness, a sense of self, until our Head Of State, the person recognised internationally as our chief representative, is one of us. The rest of the world must continue to view Australia as a colonial outpost of

Great Britain as long as our Head Of State is the Queen Of England who lives twelve thousand miles away. She can dismiss our Governor-General at any time; she has the power to disallow our legislation; we are sworn to be her subjects. So is our Governor-General.

How much better to have a Head Of State who is an Australian citizen, who lives among us, knows and understands us on a day-to-day basis rather than through the sanitised shop-window impression of the occasional whirlwind royal tour..

How much better to have a Head Of State who wants to see Australia win The Ashes and The World Cup, who wants to put Australia's economic interests ahead of those of the E.U. Let's have one of us – a mate for Head Of State.

The USA was the dominant world force for most of the twentieth century, its popular culture, from Hollywood to Rock-'n'-Roll, all pervasive. This was possible only when America ceased being a colony and became a nation. The trigger of its greatness was Independence.

The cost of America's nationhood was bloody rebellion and civil war. Australia, happily, need not go down the same path. We can part from the Mother Country on amicable terms and still remain a member of the Commonwealth of Nations.

A 2004 Newspann poll revealed that 64% of Australians want an Australian Head Of State, as opposed to 30% who do not.

Australian Unity
The Great Australia Day Breakfast 2006
26 January 2006

Perhaps a Newspann conducted in 1776 would have revealed a similar split among the American colonists regarding Independence. But not too many Americans these days would wish to be subject to the House of Windsor. They moved on – so should we.

All it takes is the courage to let go the apron-strings. Until we do, and learn to stand on our own two feet, we'll never know what it really feels like to be Australian.

John Bell