

An Australian Compact ?

**WHAT ARE THE
CORE VALUES THAT
ALL AUSTRALIANS
MIGHT RESPECT?**



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*What are the core values
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might respect?*

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Centenary of Federation



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*'I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people
Whose democratic beliefs I share,
Whose rights and liberties I respect,
Whose laws I will uphold and obey'*

It is with these words, with their eloquent expression of Australian civic aspiration, that, at citizenship ceremonies, immigrants 'become Australians'.

But what about the rest of us?

Is there a civic faith that *all* (well, nearly all) Australians might be expected to share — and, on occasion, in their own ways, affirm ?

As a matter of fact there may be. The beginnings of an answer may be found in a recommendation made in 2001, the year of the centenary of federation, in the Australian Citizenship Council's report, *Australian Citizenship for a New Century*. The Council suggested an '*Australian Compact*' and it listed the principal ideas that most people would accept as strong in our Australian liberal-democracy.

This booklet takes that one step further. It adapts the 'Compact' slightly and presents it as a talking point for Australians who would like to see their Commonwealth as, among other things, a political community, something to which we all belong and something to think about.

It's one of the oddities of Australia that, although most liberal-democratic societies define themselves partly or mainly by their political institutions and principles, we scarcely ever talk about ours in any way that is specific.

The United States, for instance, defines itself *mainly* as a political community. Partly through references to political institutions such as its constitution, its president, its congress, its high court, its federalism. And partly through references to its political faiths — such as freedom, equality of opportunity, the rule of law. Australians have no equivalent to the self confidence of these kinds of self-definitions.

Yet it's all there, waiting to come out. In fact it should be easy to talk about the civic values that most Australians would share. This booklet is intended to encourage a discussion on 'being Australian' — by doing it in *civic* terms

What would an ‘Australian Compact’ say? Here is an adaptation of the one offered by the Australian Citizenship Council ...

The Australian Compact

A DECLARATION OF COMMITMENT

- To maintain the rule of law
- To strengthen Australia as a representative liberal democracy based on universal adult suffrage and on freedom of opinion
- To maintain the ideal of the equality under the law of all Australians
- To uphold the ideal of Australia as a tolerant and fair society
- To recognise and celebrate Australia as an inclusive society of multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-racial origin
- To continue to develop Australia as a commonwealth devoted to the wellbeing of its people
- To respect and care for the land we share
- To value the unique status of the Indigenous peoples.

The Citizenship Council's Compact suggested a commitment to respect and care for the land we share; to maintain the rule of law and the ideal of the equality under the law of all Australians; to strengthen Australia as a representative liberal democracy based on universal adult suffrage and on freedom of opinion; to uphold the ideal of Australia as a tolerant and fair society; to recognise and celebrate Australia as an inclusive multi-cultural society which values its diversity; to continue to develop Australia as a society devoted to the wellbeing of its people; to value the unique status of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

On the following pages we will use these ‘commitments’ as a way of considering the fundamental civic faiths of Australians.

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First, why is it important to...

'...maintain the rule of law...'

In the simplest sense, almost all Australians accept that there have to be rules — even if they disagree with some of the rules. Yet you don't hear as much about 'the rule of law' in Australia as you do in some other countries. Ask most Australians what this phrase might mean and you may not get much of an answer.

Yet it has meanings that represent some of the really significant human victories against arbitrariness and tyranny .

For one thing, it is intended to mean that, one way or the other, *governments themselves must act under the law*: and in a liberal-democratic society like Australia it also means that there must be open discussion about the laws and how they are being used in the law courts.

And it also means *predictability* — there should be known rules about the relations people have with governments and, in certain matters, the relations they should or should not have with each other. Laws about being robbed or cheated, for example.

It is also intended to mean *fairness* — that, when appropriate, no one should be condemned unheard and hearings should be carried out openly by courts or tribunals that are as independent of governments as possible, and with known procedures in which, amongst other things, an accused person is presumed innocent until a judgement is made.

It is also intended to mean *equality* — that every person is entitled to their day in court. Everyone should be declared equal before the law, everyone should be entitled to the equal protection of the law and the cost of law should not unreasonably be allowed to prevent a person's claim for justice.

And it is intended to be *democratic* — in the sense that, ultimately, it is the citizens themselves who — if usually at second-hand — are responsible for the making of the rules. Australia was the first nation-state to be voted into existence by its future citizens, providing a Constitution that is a kind of basic law that can be changed only by the voting of its citizens. Along with this, if more remotely, the law-making of parliaments and local councils is done by 'representatives' elected by the citizens.

Of course, things are not as perfect as that — both in law courts and in police stations the principles can be broken and the 'democratic' side of law-making is, necessarily delegated. But in a liberal-democratic society the principles of the rule of law are more likely than not to be put into effect and as principles they are vital to making a civil society workable. They are one of the bases of liberty.

However this doesn't mean blind worship of any law. An offsetting principle is that bad laws should be challenged. If you are ready to risk losing, you can also break what you see as a bad law in order to try to have it abolished, or amended. For instance various harsh systems of censorship and banning in Australia have been replaced after individuals or groups broke what were seen as bad laws. (Freedom of the press, for example and freedom of speech generally were strengthened by struggle.)

The great nineteenth century United States exponent of civil disobedience, Henry David Thoreau put it more grandly when he said: 'Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison'. (Although, as with any other political principle, what that means in practice depends on how things are at the time.)

3

The fact that the Australian Compact does not begin with ‘democracy’ may be surprising, but the rule of law is essential to the workings of an effective democracy. However, with that settled, consider effective ways to...

‘... strengthen Australia as a representative democracy ...’

It is ‘representative democracy’ not ‘democracy’ straight out. The word has too many meanings for that. At its most expansive the idea of democracy can be founded in a respect for a common humanity and also a respect for the diversities of human potential; it can indicate dedication to equality of basic rights and opportunities and, in the form of social justice, to certain minimum material standards for its citizens. But what is most often meant by ‘democracy’ in liberal-democratic societies is what we call *representative democracy*.

‘Representative’ democracy isn’t rule by the people themselves. How could they do that? All Australians can’t come together once a week and ‘run Australia’. ‘Representative democracy’ is the best we can do.

There are many areas where people can participate in the running of common affairs but this can be done directly only in small, and, usually, local units. What has to be done with a show as large as the governing of the Commonwealth of Australia is to delegate this to others and we delegate it very largely through electing members of political parties to parliament. Then the balance of party power in parliament decides which party or coalition of parties will provide a government and what policy and new laws will be. We call this ‘representative democracy’ but most of the people we elect don’t do much ‘representing’. A better phrase is *‘electoralised democracy’* — we do our democracy through elections.

It doesn’t sound as grand when it’s put like that but this way of doing politics has two enormous advantages over other systems. One is that governments can change without disorder — no rioting, no arson, no killings of the kind that can imperil liberties (whereas in tyrannical regimes there is sometimes no alternative to some rioting). And having regular elections means that the politicians are likely to keep their eyes on what is happening ‘out there’.

It also means that, through referendums and elections, all legal power comes, ultimately, from the citizens. The potential of the people is one of the ultimate tests of any democracy (even if, sometimes, their political leaders cannot bring out the best in that potential). Sometimes the potential of the people works well. Sometimes it works disastrously. We should always remember the words of Benjamin Franklin, one of the founders of the US Constitution when

he said that what could turn democracy into despotism was the corruption of the people themselves.

That is one of the reasons why it is so essential to recognise that while we ‘delegate’ the governing of Australia we can, in our own ways, feel connected with it. Essential to that is the free expression of opinion. So we should add that we are concerned with strengthening Australia as

‘...a representative democracy based on freedom of opinion...’

It’s more usual than not for the written constitutions of representative democracies to have special provisions concerning the rights of

- freedom of expression
- freedom of information
- freedom of assembly
- freedom to demonstrate
- freedom of association

as well as other freedoms that are seen as necessary for the successful working of democracy.

These rights are usually not absolute. But recognising them affirms that there is a lot more to democracy than what goes on inside the parliament houses and the government departments of the capital cities and in the town halls of the suburbs and regional centres.


Australia does not have any formal statement about rights to freedoms of this kind but many people believe that they should be put into the Constitution, or into Acts of Parliament that are ‘entrenched’ so that they cannot easily be altered — or in some other way asserted and

protected. Australia is almost alone now among liberal democracies in not having some formal statement about these freedoms.

At the same time most people probably understand that these freedoms can be essential to our lives as individuals and to our society in general. They are part of what a famous US Supreme Court justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes, called ‘free trade in the market place of ideas’ and their suppression can be a political and human disaster.

Many ideas never enter formal political discussion directly. Many of them are pursued for their own sake out of intellectual curiosity or for particular purposes, but some are pressed on politicians and governments. Sometimes in complex arguments. Sometimes, more simply, in protests organised by special groups. In fact very few ideas begin within the political parties and the government bureaucracies: they begin in free interminglings of conjecture and discussion out in the market places of ideas.

What is also vital is that many citizens examine public issues amongst themselves in their own places and in their own ways. They may not see themselves as ‘citizens’ when they do this, but, for better or worse, it can be their main form of citizenship. For this reason the media can be seen (and respected) as an essential part of the political system (but open to criticism like any other part of the political system).



There is another element. What if the voting system is unfair, or inadequate? It is not enough to say that Australia is a ‘representative democracy’. How the electoral system works in practice is the test. That is why we need five extra words...

‘...a representative democracy based on universal adult suffrage’

Merely having some voting going on isn’t enough. The voting should be *universal* — it should be declared as a right held by all citizens. (There is no declaration about it in the Australian Constitution — a truly extraordinary omission.)

But is universal adult suffrage enough? Shouldn’t voting and the electoral system also be *fair* ? As it happens the Australian system of preferential voting is one of the fairest in the world for voting in single member constituencies. However one serious thing still goes wrong: from time to time a party gains a majority of representatives in parliament although the overall voting

shows that a majority of voters didn't want it. What can be done about that?

The first question is: *Why don't Australians care about this unfairness?* There are ways of overcoming it that leave most of our present system as it is. Until then we will go on with the odd situation of governments claiming they have been put there by the people even when that is not true and they have in fact been put there by a minority of voters.

Should two other words be added — 'fair' and 'equal', so that the commitment is to strengthening Australia as a representative democracy based on *universal, fair and equal adult suffrage?* It's still a contentious issue. For example, should the boundaries of constituencies be based on the number of voters, or on the overall number of people in a constituency?

But is simply making sure that government is based on a majority of votes enough? Aren't there times when, in the general interest, a government may act against the wishes of a majority?

Even more, should a majority-based government infringe the rights of minorities when they are not bringing harm to others? It is because of questions like these that we should also be described as ...

...a liberal representative democracy...

What does that mean, in practice?

- People should be free to pursue their own ways of life so long as they do not harm others.
- Free expression of opinion, freedom of information, freedom of assembly, freedom to demonstrate and freedom of association should be seen as some of the hallmarks of a **liberal** representative democracy.

- A two-party system or a multi-party system gives vigour to democratic life.
- The independence and impartiality of the law courts is essential.
- So is the independence or semi-independence of institutions set up by the government.
- So are laws such as freedom of information Acts which compel a government to disclose details of its doings — and the right of parliamentary committees and special inquiries such as royal commissions to call for documents and summon witnesses.
- So are the administrative tribunals that deal with complaints about the actions of government departments. So is the independence of officials such as the auditors-general or the ombudsmen.

Having an upper house and a lower house of parliament has also been seen as liberal, in the sense of providing a check on governments — although if the election of an upper house is less democratic than the election of a lower house this can be seen as an arbitrary check. Originally, an upper house in the states was seen as a place where the more conservative forces could check the actions of a 'people's house'. However most of the Australian parliaments have now democratised their upper houses so that the upper house is elected on a proportional system which allows for minor parties to gain seats, offsetting the two-party character of the lower house. But what the powers of upper houses should be is still disputed.

Is a federal system 'liberal'? In the United States it is seen as essential to a system of 'checks and balances' that divides power to prevent domination by the central government. In Australia we see it more simply as a way of just dividing power between several large regions. Professor Cheryl Saunders has pointed out in *Keeping the Show Together* (a sister publication to this one) that Australians have not tended to value federalism for its appreciation of diversity. Yet Australians who are afraid of the idea of 'diversity' might be more receptive to it if they saw it as an extension of the idea of federalism into social and cultural life.

However, most importantly, the very basis of our system is the idea of a 'civil society'...a whole range of activities that go beyond the state where people, whether as individuals or groups, get on with those things that interest them and most of the things over which they have some control. Without a flourishing civil society Australia would never be liberal.

4

'We have begun with two ideals — the ideal of the rule of law and the ideal of Australia as a representative liberal democracy based on universal adult suffrage and on freedom of opinion. Yet many Australians might have expected that the ideals of equality — of 'egalitarianism', even 'mateship'- should have headed the list.

But the limits of these have to be recognised. For that reason the ideal we speak about is the ideal of ...

'...equality under the law of all Australians...'

In speaking of equality it is wise to be cautious.

Mateship had its deepest meaning as a blue collar worker term (with special overtones in the union movement and among rural workers) and in the first world war that meaning spread to the army. But, despite the many good things about 'mateship' it was doubly exclusive: it was a creed of male comradeship and it was a creed of bonding against all those who weren't within the circle. It may be that the belief in 'mateship', given its limited meanings, is best seen and best talked about as part of Australian social life, rather than Australian political life.

Egalitarianism? Actually the word has moved into common speech only fairly recently (if it *has* moved into common speech) but the idea has been around for a long time. Meaning? In Australia it certainly does not mean that we have all been born equal or that no one should be better off materially than anyone else — although to some people it has meant that we should all be more or less the same (which is a different thing). What it often (usually?) does mean is that we have at least an appearance of equality of manners in our relations with each other (even though we are not all the same) — but that's not a matter on which you make laws or amend constitutions. Again, it belongs to social life, not specifically political life. What it can also mean, unfortunately, is a desire for uniformity — a dislike of difference, as if it is a sin against equality that we don't all act the same.

A better way to start is to use the word 'equality'. Here there are some things that are relatively clear, and that come under the law, or could come under the law.

Two of them have already been listed. One is the idea of *equal civic rights*. That all adult citizens


have the right to vote is the simplest example. The other fairly clear example of equality is that we should all have *equal rights of legal access and of treatment by the courts*. (See ‘the rule of law’)

Another fairly simple example of equality is that given by *anti-discrimination laws*. Some day there may be a section in the Constitution that states that the courts and administrative authorities may not treat persons differently by reason of their religious faith or their opinions, their race or their skin colour, their ethnic or their national origin, their sex, their age, their place of residence, their sexual preference or their marital status. Even without constitutional change the various anti-discrimination acts provide for much of this and, where they don’t, they might be extended.

There would probably be wider agreement on *equality of opportunity*, especially in education — although the realities can be more difficult than is often admitted. Equality of opportunity may be what Australians must often have in mind when they speak of a ‘fair go’.

There is one demand for ‘equality’ that should be strongly resisted — because it is illiberal. It is the argument that there should be no special cases. This was an argument used by some people against making a special case, in some ways, of the Indigenous people. But there are thousands of special cases — flood victims, war veterans, Olympic athletes ... some separated out because of their disadvantages, others because of their advantages. Why pick on the Indigenous people — who are, historically, the first of Australia’s special cases? What equality can mean however is that there should not be discrimination within a particular special case.

(What has received practically no discussion in Australia is a schedule of equality in the *duties* of a citizen. What might those duties be? The duty to pay taxes? The duty to vote? The duty to give evidence in courts and serve on juries? The duty to obey the laws? The duty of children to be educated? The duty, in an emergency, to give military service?)



Ideas of equality merge into ideas of fairness and of tolerance. These are seen as so important that the Australian Compact calls for upholding the ideal of Australia as ...

‘...a tolerant and fair society...’

Fairness?

If you were trying to build up a new kind of speech-making for Australian politics you could do worse than build it around the idea of ‘a fair go’. However it would have to be given a meaning wider than just helping underdogs. Look over this list to get an idea of what it might mean. It could include: ...

- A fair go in the courts, under the rule of law.
- A fair go for voters.
- A fair go for parties in the electoral system.
- A fair go in expressing opinions.
- A fair go in education and employment.
- A fair go for minorities.
- A fair share for the less fortunate.

Tolerance?

There has been some concern in Australia about the idea of ‘diversity’, as if there is something wrong with a society that has different kinds of people in it. (This may have something to do with the idea that Australians should all be ‘the same’. There is also a tendency to assume, wrongly, that all that ‘diversity’ means is ‘multicultural’.) Yet a society doesn’t necessarily fall to bits because there are different kinds of people in it.

It’s true that some elements of diversity can be dangerous: for example, we don’t want to increase our diversity by having, say, an Australian Nazi party to increase the range of political activity. But we must recognise that all societies are ‘diverse’ and in fact a thoroughly uniform society might be so rigid that, at a time of inevitable change, it could, simply, freeze up. In Australia there are differences between regions — between the states, for example, and, within them, between capital cities, suburbs, regional centres, country towns, rural areas. There are enormous differences in the kinds of work people do and the effects it has on them, and in their incomes and in their general aspirations and lifestyles. There are differences in their religious beliefs and in their secular faiths and in the general values they hold.

How are all these different kinds of people supposed to get on with each other? Partly by minding their own business and not caring if everyone in a society is not ‘the same’ as everyone else — but also by remembering that, although they are in many ways different, as citizens all have an equal status. They are all equally Australians.

The big thing that this requires is not that you love all of your fellow citizens. It is more cool than that: it is that you ‘tolerate’ even those of them you don’t like. This is not a patronising approach. The toleration is on both sides. You may not like *them*. They may not like *you*. But you tolerate *them*. And they tolerate you. No matter what you think of each other you both live on publicly equal terms.

Of course it makes for easier going if you are courteous to each other or look for things in each other that you share or find interesting, and there may be many matters in which, as fellow citizens or workmates or sporting fans, you share attitudes. But, with tolerance, you also

co-exist: you allow for each other's differences. That may be, at times, seem too 'cool'. But it's better than a 'hot' approach that tries to eliminate differences.


Historically, two of the bitter divisions between Australians have been those of *religion* and *class*. In both cases there was conflict and distrust. But in both cases, each side, in the cool spirit of tolerance, lived in co-existence with the differences of the others.

Religion?

Until the 1960s, in varying degrees, this kind of cool tolerance existed between Catholics and Protestants in Australia. There was a mutual contempt for each other's religious faiths and practices, and many rivalries and distrusting. But, despite extreme religious sectarianism, each side accepted the existence of the other, however disapprovingly.

Class?

One of the claims of the extreme egalitarians was that Australia was a 'classless' society. That has never been true. What was true was that there was no built-in hereditary aristocracy in Australia (although there were some local attempts at imitation) but there were great differences between people in their economic circumstances — in how they worked (or didn't work) and in some communities, especially those who lived near their work — wharf labourers, coal miners — there was a sense of class struggle. Nevertheless social cohesion was not destroyed by violence.



Australian politicians used sometimes to exploit religious sectarianism — privately. And even when there were public appeals to religious prejudice they were expressed in a sort of code.

There was no limit, however, for most of Australia's history, on the vilifications of race and there were many ethnic slurs. Then, at least on the surface, Australians seemed to settle down until, during the Tampa affair in 2001, the talkback programs burst open with hatred and incitements to violence.

Constant vigilance is required in promoting the idea of racial and ethnic tolerance.

What is needed in an 'Australian Compact' is a statement that Australians should recognise and celebrate Australia as

'...an inclusive society of multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-racial origin'.

There have been backslips (and even, perhaps, during the vilifications of Muslims in 2001, avalanches) but we must continue to recognise the great achievements of Australians in becoming a society that, as these things go, has, on the whole, successfully brought together immigrants from so many nations, races and religious and ethnic groups.

That success story must continue to be told. Perhaps, on occasions like Australia Day, we should commemorate how the first European immigrations to Australia began in the eighteenth century with four main ethnic groups and four main religious groups. They all came from the British and Irish Isles but there was a great potential for explosion in the differences between them, thrown together, as they were, in strange circumstances on what seemed an alien shore. Some people may oppose such an idea on the grounds that many Australians are still basically prejudiced. But it should be remembered that there are great elements of racism and xenophobia in any society and that, overall, even in the best of societies, events can bring out the worst in people.

What point is there in merely crying prejudice? Isn't the point more to ask the old question: *What is to be done?*

There may be three answers. One is: *eternal vigilance*. The second is: *realistic praise*. The third is: *establishing the conditions of coexistence*.

Eternal vigilance

To avoid outbreaks of prejudice requires constant vigilance from the political leaders of a country. It requires care in how they discuss controversial issues themselves. It requires absolute abstention from trying to make political capital out of prejudice. And it requires diligence in rebutting outbreaks if they do occur — not just in arson or violence, but on talkback radio.

Think how striking it would have been if, after a Muslim mosque was burned down in Brisbane during the 2001 elections, all the political leaders had come together to stress that, while division on policy on asylum seekers was simply part of the political process, to spread this out to racial, ethnic and sectarian vilification was a breach in the normal political process. Each speaker could have ended with a short piece on the virtues of ethnic and religious tolerance.

Realistic praise

The more toleration becomes a strong feature of Australian life, the less is the likelihood of avalanches, or even mere backslips, of xenophobia.

But the 'celebration' of success should be realistic. That means, among other things, that if some people are opposed to Australia being thought of as a society of multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-racial origin then political leaders shouldn't ignore that opposition. They should discuss it. We should not smother problems in over-congratulation. We should learn ways of discussing problems openly — but without vituperative ranting.

Establishing the conditions of coexistence

When we celebrate Australia as a society of many cultures we should understand that one of the difficulties with the idea of being 'multicultural' was that it suggested that the only groups who were 'cultural' were non-English-speaking ethnic groups. It did not even recognise the cultures, say, of country towns. And it narrowed the idea of 'diversity' so that it seemed to mean only ethnic diversity.

Another difficulty went the other way — with a definition of 'multiculturalism' so wide that it cast aside the special problems of xenophobia, and racial and ethnic hatred.

A third difficulty was that the excesses of the early 'assimilation' period of the 1950s were cast aside, but nothing much was left for encouraging co-existence.

At the height of the assimilation period the idea could be that the sooner New Australians became approved versions of a 'typical Australian' the better. But Australians have always been different sorts of people in a host of different ways. It is part of the richness and resourcefulness of our national life that, in spite of attempts to make us all look the same, we can't all be reduced to a few simple stereotypes. It was a relief that this unworkable (and illiberal) ambition to produce a typical Australian was abandoned.

It was essential that immigrants and their descendants should have the freedom to maintain aspects of their cultural identity if they wished to do so. At the same time some of the more positive sides of 'assimilation' were useful — not as 'assimilation' but as forms of integration or coexistence. Immigrants should be assisted in all ways to learn English and to learn something of how certain things are likely to be done in Australia: the communities in which they settle should be encouraged to make them feel at home. If there are special problems about coexistence, those problems should be admitted so that, in open discussion, something might be done about them.

We can hardly pick out a few characteristics and say: *Hey! There it is! Now that's the real way of being a true Australian!* But what might be expected is that immigrants should be encouraged to take up the idea that there are core Australian civic values that all Australian citizens might hold in common. In other words, an 'Australian Compact'.

5

The Liberal Party leader, Alfred Deakin, was not only one of the fathers of federation. He was also the politician who, in his oratory, most tried to establish how Australia should be a true 'commonwealth' in which there would be economic justice, equal laws and equal opportunities for all and where people would be able to lead healthy lives, engage in honest toil and enjoy fair wages, fair hours, fair prices and fair conditions of employment.

It wouldn't have surprised Deakin that part of an 'Australian Compact' called on Australians to develop their country as...

'...a commonwealth devoted to the wellbeing of its people'

Presumably, a hundred years later, Australians would, in general terms, go along with this idea. But what would being concerned about 'wellbeing' mean? Would there be any agreement?

Australians began with an early spurt in what became known as 'social justice', taking it ahead of most countries. Then Australia lagged behind a number of others. There were no unemployment or sickness benefits until a Labor government introduced them in 1945; no health scheme until a Liberal government introduced one in 1951. No attempt at a general 'social welfare' policy until the Labor government of 1972-75 — and that was at a time when government-backed welfare was shortly to go out of fashion.

Another way of looking at Australia is that it was not an ordinary welfare state with a strong government presence but, as Professor Stephen Castles has put it, 'a wage earners' welfare state'. It was not government welfare policy that was seen as central but full employment and its spin-offs, with fair wages for a fair day's work.

This belief was translated into ordinary economic policy by a policy of *Jobs and Growth*'. Now the *Growth* continues, but for some years now, as, like other prosperous countries, Australia becomes a 'services economy' or a 'knowledge economy' (or whatever the phrase is) *Growth* no longer turns into *Jobs* for everyone. Even the idea of what having a job means continues to shift.

The prosperous countries are all going through the greatest change to the labour force since the nineteenth century industrial revolution. By incorporating new technologies, factories become more and more productive — and employ fewer and fewer people and in general blue collar workers in construction work and transport as well as factories, grow proportionately fewer.

Many of the lower level service industries depend increasingly on part time employment. Many firms contract out. The booming sector is among the high-knowledge traditional professionals and among the new specialist 'knowledge workers' — something that Deakin could never have imagined. In this booming sector belief in the old work ethic, even the ingrained ideas of a fixed career or of loyalty to a firm have all been weakened.

Belief has also been weakened in the old ways of running what were thought of as mixed economies (government and private enterprise together). And some types of intervention — supporting hospitals and medical services, for instance, become more and more costly. In a period of caution about government spending almost all new, future-looking ideas can be frightened off — even those that are not big spending programs.

A hundred years ago, when people came from Europe to inspect Australia as a 'social laboratory' Deakin was proclaiming that in social and economic reform, 'so great will be Australia's progress that **AUSTRALIA WILL SHOW A WAY TO THE REST OF THE WORLD.**' That kind of confidence has completely evaporated. Its enthusiasm might now seem almost un-Australian. The Olympics enthusiasm didn't last long.

There is no point in looking for detail in estimating what core values there are in Australia about sustaining the wellbeing of the Australian people. The aim itself would still be a common value, but how it would be achieved is not something on which people agree. There are disputes about the degree of government intervention — and not enough discussion about new approaches. For decades there was some agreement from the main parties, leaving differences as matters of degree. Now there are hesitations and confusions.

One might nevertheless ask: is there some way in which Australians can seize on the *opportunities* that are offered by change instead of simply being absorbed in its *problems*? Is there some way in which the idea of 'welfare' can be widened into 'wellbeing' (including recreation, health and continuing education) and can it be found in new potentials that lie in this new age? Some new way of giving meaning to the idea that we all have a new kind of social equity? And what that would mean?

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This being Australia, some people might now be asking: WHAT ABOUT THE IDEA OF THE LAND? The answer could be a commitment to ...

‘...respect and care for the land we share...’

There may now be no other prosperous modern society in which attitudes towards ‘the land’ might still be put forward under the heading of ‘civic values’. Earlier, as nationalism developed in the nineteenth century when new nations in Europe and the Americas appealed to ‘national sentiment’ they did it partly by evoking ‘the land’ — and so did some of the older nations as they, too, had a go at redefining themselves.

They celebrated ‘the land’ in painting, in verse, in fiction, in song, in essays and plays, in national anthems and in national rhetoric. If the spirit of egalitarianism was invoked, it might be invoked as coming from ‘our very soil’ (thereby taking the human or *civic* achievement out of it.) But, even as that celebration of ‘the land’ faded, as the 2001 commemorations showed, many Australians still summon images of ‘the land’ as a principal way of defining Australia.

How can one give a *civic* cast to this still pervading idea?

It *is*, in a general sense, a civic idea — ‘the land’ becomes a symbol of us all — a place on the map of which we all have our views but in which we may presume we have certain common national interests as well, bringing us together in self interest. And part of that self interest might include a shared sense of custodianship.

But it is the long history of contention and dispute about the land that raises the main civic issues. ‘The land’ has been a great source of civic division.

Looking back, one can now see the dispossession of the original inhabitants as the first civic issue, even if at the time this was taken by most of the colonists as a matter of course — and even if many of them had doubts about whether the Indigenous people really were ‘inhabitants’ anyway. That issue has continued until the present day, although with a great shift of emphasis on custodianship and sharing unimaginable over most of Australia’s history.

Where the land first became a matter of dispute between Europeans was the question of how it was going to be ‘settled’ and by whom. Conflicts between ‘the settlers’ with their small holdings and ‘the squatters’ with their large sheep and cattle runs went on for decades, from rowdy demonstrations in the streets to rowdy speeches in the parliaments — and ended up as

one of the great land reform movements of the nineteenth century. Democratic feeling in Australia grew partly out of a longing for greater fairness in who was to hold land.

Even the feeling for suburban home ownership was part of the movement. Most Australians lived in cities and towns but their householder's gardens gave them a sense of security that provided one of the basic impulses of Australian politics just as the movement for parks — whether the large national parks in which Australia was a pioneer or small suburban parks — gave a sense of shared ownership.

In farming and mining, '*national development*' of the land became one of the defining elements of much of Australian nationalism, although for much of the time the excessive zeal of these programs — with erosion, salinity, pollution — damaged many of the assets they were intended to develop.

At the same time modest movements for what we would now call 'conservation' were forming, although it was not until the 1960s that conservation movements began to spread.

Now the prospect of a general concern about care for the land has never been greater — both in the more careful husbandry of farming land and the more generous preservation of native forests and wilderness areas. Is there a chance that opposing interests may group and that a faith in 'sustainable development' of the land may yet become one of the elements of civic faith in Australia?

What was entirely new, was a concern, after so many years, about the long, unhappy dispossession of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples.

That is why the last section of an 'Australian Compact' might call on all Australians to...

'... value the unique status of the Indigenous people...'

What kind of commitment would be most likely to be acceptable to the widest range of Australian citizens? 'Reconciliation' is, in itself, not enough. Nor is the call for an 'apology'. Not because these are not highly significant but because it might be hoped that the call for them is part of a controversy that will pass. (Nor should a commitment mean closing our eyes to the

bad things that can happen to good intentions in Indigenous communities. These must be discussed.)

But if a call is to be made it should be made for an embedded recognition of the most important of all truths about the Indigenous peoples.

These are two principal (and inter-related) facts:

- The Indigenous peoples did not come here accepting that the laws and ways of going-on would be different from their homeland. This was their homeland and it was a homeland where they had their own rights and customs.
- The Europeans did not come to settle unoccupied land when they came to Australia. They displaced the original inhabitants — and continued to do so — and these actions have had effects that disturbed much of the cultures of the Indigenous peoples and their societies.

As well as the special status this gives the Indigenous people, Australians may also value the uniqueness of their cultures — cultures that are not just for museums but are living and developing and, in fact, provide one of the most unique contributions that Australia makes to the world.



What use could an Australian Compact be put to?

It's very important to accept what this 'Compact' would *not* be.

- ◆ It is *not* like a gum tree or a koala or an Akubra hat. It is not saying here is something that is uniquely Australian, something that you won't find anywhere else in the world. Superficially, the principles it puts forward are common to all of the prosperous liberal-democratic countries — although they take different shapes from one place to the next. But ... after all ... so what? That hasn't stopped those other countries from working out ways of expounding and celebrating their own civic identity — of showing how these principles feel in their own country. Why aren't we ready to do the same and start talking up what we do with them?
- ◆ It is *not* intended as an emotional appeal — at least not to start with. It's not something to be put to music. It's a discussion list, giving our citizens something to think about. But just look at it again ... Ideas like 'the rule of law' or 'equality' or 'freedom of opinion' are among some of the great human ideals and, if you think about them, they can be full of emotional appeal. Perhaps they need to be written up, in Australian terms. Tell some really good stories about them to bring out their local feeling.
- ◆ It is *not* intended, by itself, to 'hold Australians together'. But then there is no single element that does 'hold Australians together'. Often the people who suggest that there is are simply trying to press Australia into their own image of Australia. In any case, what may most 'hold Australians together' is that Australia is a peaceful civil society in, as these things go, good working order and it is, on the whole, a society permeated by civic trust — and threatened mainly by possible outbreaks of intolerance.
- ◆ It does *not* give us a simple, graphic picture of a 'typical Australia'. But there isn't a typical Australia. Each person's Australia is the Australia they build up in their own minds from their own experience. What it does do is to list the only possible tests we can make of what it should mean to be an Australian. If 'un-Australian' means anything, it should mean someone who rejects the ways of going on that are listed in this 'Compact'.

What should be done with this idea of a compact? For a start, talk it out. Amend it perhaps, although keeping it civic. Then publish it in suitable form for schools, for immigrants, and for citizenship and other ceremonies.

It's a good thing in itself for people to accept that 'politics' is not just for politicians, that the idea of 'the political' goes beyond party politics and takes up some of the great principles of our relations with each other, and with the state.

For that matter, the Australian Compact involves some of the highest aspirations that human beings have expressed — and have, so often, betrayed.

Other publications ...

- The Barton Lectures. *Unity and Diversity: A national conversation*. Edited by Helen Irving. Published by ABC Books in association with the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee.
- *2001: Why are we celebrating?* By Donald Horne and Helen Irving. Published by the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee.
- *Imaginative Country? Some ideas on the arts, on entertainment, on the humanities and on public intellectual life in Australia*. Published by the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee.
- *Keeping the show together: the Federalism Forums, 2001*. Edited by Elaine Thompson. Published by the NSW Centenary of Federation Committee.

New South Wales
Centenary of Federation



An Australian Compact

A DECLARATION OF COMMITMENT

- To maintain the rule of law
- To strengthen Australia as a representative liberal democracy based on universal adult suffrage and on freedom of opinion
- To maintain the ideal of the equality under the law of all Australians
- To uphold the ideal of Australia as a tolerant and fair society
- To recognise and celebrate Australia as an inclusive society of multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-racial origin
- To continue to develop Australia as a society devoted to the wellbeing of its people
- To respect and care for the land we share
- To value the unique status of the Indigenous peoples.