

## **NSW CENTENARY OF FEDERATION COMMITTEE Barton Lectures**

WHAT HOLDS AUSTRALIANS TOGETHER DESPITE THEIR DIVERSITY?

Barton Lecture No. 1

### **By Donald Horne**

If you had gone up to Edmund Barton a hundred years ago and asked him for his views on 'mainstream Australia' he would probably have assumed that you wanted to chat about the Murray-Darling river basin. It would be decades before "mainstream" became a popular term for dominant concepts of an imagined national identity (another term that Barton also would never have heard, because it hadn't been invented).

He would have taken it as a matter of course that there were feelings of difference within the newly created Commonwealth. After all, it was because of the perceived differences between regions that the Commonwealth was a federation and had a constitution which provided for the creation of new states; and it was a time when anti-city feeling could be expressed with greater acrimony than any Hansonite could muster. If you had mentioned women he would have known that they had been created different. He knew about class warfare, although he also knew about aspirations to civilise it. Being an Australian politician, he would have been very much alive to the sectarian hatreds between Protestants and Catholics. As to the Aborigines - he might not have bothered to mention them: in the debates on federation the indigenous people were scarcely discussed.

He would have hoped that a sense of being Australian overcame these differences - not ~~an~~ Australian<sup>1</sup> in the terms of the Bush nationalism that was developing in the 1890s but in terms of the civic nationalism that was associated with some of the rhetoric of the federal movement - and expired not long after it was born. But he also would have known that two great faiths were shared by most Australians: their membership of a "White Australia" and their membership of the British Empire and "the British race". You can't begin to understand recent discontents unless you see them as residues - one of them noxious - from these past faiths.

By the standard of the times Barton was restrained when he said: I do not think that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality between the Englishman and the Chinaman. What was to become the White Australia immigration policy was seen by some as liberal and democratic in aspiration, based on the latest scientific evidence, and wisely concerned with the political, social, economic, moral and cultural well being of Australians. But the language in which it was expressed often drew lavishly and luridly on the lexicon of vilification. What is now graffiti language was then part of public discourse. William Lane, the utopian labour writer, did not restrain himself when he said: I would rather see my daughter dead in her coffin than kissing a black man on the mouth. Nor did the cultivated literary critic A.G. Stephens when he wrote: Next in importance to the preservation of the national life is the purification of the national blood." And it wasn't restrained for a Bulletin writer to lampoon the Chinese as not morally or physically or intellectually fit to sit down in the same continent as Europeans". The policy was to become ingrained as a principal definition of Australia. When he came back from the Treaty of Paris in 1919, Billy Hughes said that Australians had died to maintain those ideals which we have nailed to

the very topmost of our flagpole - White Australia, and those other aspirations of this young Democracy.

In 1878 the schoolteacher Peter Dodds McCormick wrote "Advance Australia Fair". It caught on so firmly that it was sung by a choir of 10,000 at the inauguration of the Commonwealth in 1901 and played by mass bands at the naming-of-Canberra ceremony in 1907. I'd like to remind you of the words of a now unsung stanza:

When gallant Cook from Albion sailed,  
To trace wide oceans o'er,  
True British courage bore him on  
Till he landed on our shore.  
And there he raised old England's flag,  
The standard of the brave.  
With all her faults we love her still.  
Britannia, rule the wave!

When 10,000 people sang that stanza in 1901 no one laughed. No one laughed when massed bands played it in 1907 at the naming-of-Canberra ceremony. No one laughed when my school friends and I used to sing it on Empire Day at Muswellbrook Rural District School in the early 1930s along with those other patriotic Australian airs "Rule, Britannia!", "Land of Hope and Glory" and "Three Cheers for the Red, White and Blue". Along with ritualised rhetoric, sacred phrases, historical tales, imperial slogans and iconic images, these patriotic airs also ingrained a principal definition of an Australia linked to Britain by the crimson thread of kinship, and still so strong that in December, 1941, fifty years after Henry Parkes coined that phrase, John Curtin's first call was not to look to America but to preserve in Australia "the British-speaking race". Some day someone should write a book about all this. Having replaced the fatuous idea of an 'Anglo-Celtic' heritage with the more useful idea of a "British and Irish heritage" the book could begin by presenting the diverse and sometimes contradictory folk heritages that came out with the English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh people who were for so long the dominant immigrants and who, in ways we don't know much about, negotiated common styles and common differences that came to be seen as Australian. Racism would be there, as in the British race and the Anglo-Saxon race, chosen by God for their civilising missions. And xenophobia, as Australia faithfully preserved, unaltered, the various British ways of despising Continentals. There was the imperialism of the exciting bigness of Empire, so that world geography largely revolved around British naval coaling stations and empire trade; and the imperialism of alliance, sharing honour and self interest with a great power (with such a powerful belief in loyalty that it would be transferred to the United States when the time came); and the glamour of the many cultures of the Empire. There were also cultural links, some English, some British, some European, providing intimations of a broader European civilisation, with temptations, among some Australians, according to taste, a cultural cringe or a cultural strut. And there was a kind of High Britishry, created over 130 years in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, described by Linda Colley in her book, *Britons*, as a story of Protestant, imperial, military and constitutional ascendancy. And, these days, a kind of residual Australian Britishry that sees the monarchy, and certain other institutions, as simply part of the ordinary business of being Australian.

Now I'll put in an interlude. We'll stage it in December, 1960, when I had just taken over the editorship of *The Bulletin*, which, in a contradictory metaphor, had turned into a living museum of decaying attitudes - attitudes that were soon to be swept out of public sight throughout Australia, and were to be swept out of *The Bulletin* in a couple of rough

months. The slogan on its leader page was still "Australia for the White Man". (In a more rabid period it had been Australia for the Australians. The cheap Chinaman, the cheap Nigger, and the cheap European pauper to be absolutely excluded.) The first thing we did was to pluck that out of the page and throw it into the waste bin. We no longer found it necessary to run pieces on how the newspapers were making pets of Colombo Plan Asian students and, in general, we put an end to its self-proclaimed campaign of (to quote) keeping Australia racially in one piece. We cut out the Abo jokes and the girlie jokes (dentist to young woman with uplift: When I said what lovely falsies I was only referring to your teeth) and the reffo jokes. (By that stage the reffos no longer had Yid noses.) We no longer found it necessary to commission weekly articles such as the one that said that immigrants from places like Cyprus, Poland and the depressed toe of Italy, each living in "its national enclave, sticking to its racist and religious habits", were challenging the fibre of Australians and "weakening our British ties". Or how occasionally some Continental lashes out at a crowd with an axe or wipes out a family, committing "horrifying crimes unknown to Australians". And The Bulletin was also a depository of the stereotype of Australians as a people of the Bush (with the Digger as a lad from the Bush in military uniform and the Lifesaver as a lad from the Bush in a cossie), of true Aussies defined by certain kinds of landscapes and certain kinds of rural and nature verse and by certain kinds of fauna.

Australia was on the edge of a great, politically bi-partisan sweep of change, running through the three post-Menzies Liberal governments, the Whitlam government and the Fraser government - in the mild reform, followed only a few years later by the abolition, of the White Australia immigration policy; in the abandonment of a narrowly defined, assimilationist policy and its replacement by acceptance of a more hybrid Australia (preceded by a quick death of the old Protestant-Catholic sectarianism); in the recognition of the indigenous peoples as part of the Australian polity and the beginning of a new indigenous agenda. And in a graduated turning away from Britain as the British departed west of Suez and into Europe, as Australia gained new trading partners, as the cultural cringe straightened out. Even our views of international sightseeing changed. Allowing for the necessary inadequacies of politics, this was an enlightened and liberal period in Australian life, much of it initiated by circumstance, or from activists outside politics, but one in which politicians played a mature and honourable role. They provided public leadership (an earlier example was Arthur Calwell's promulgation of the newly coined phrase, New Australian as a possible alternative to the racial slurs 'dago', 'wog', 'reffo' 'Balt, etc.). And, although there was no declared pact, there was an effective bipartisanship in which neither side in politics seized party-political advantage by hinting at racist, ethnic or xenophobic prejudice. And it was one in which, overall, our citizens showed more tolerance and more common sense than they had been given credit for. This also is worth a book - a book that might end by speculating on why some of our fellow citizens then turned backwards.

One should add that all this was accompanied by what may be the most significant social revolution of all - the continuing redefinition of the roles of women. What's more - there was a rapid overturning of censorship and a rapid decolonisation of the Australian artistic, intellectual and scholarly imaginations, overwhelming the old stereotypes that were still dominant in The Bulletin before I took it over - and to such effect that when we got to the Tin Symphony in the Opening Ceremony at the Olympic Games these legends and stereotypes were presented as matters of whimsy and when we got to the Centennial Park evening ceremony on January 1 a ten-year-old boy of Sri Lankan origin was one of those who spoke up for Australia.

Things seemed to be going along all right until another great national faith was challenged. This was the faith, conceptualised in the 1880s, in a national economic development to which all Australians might contribute and from which all Australians might expect a return. It was a faith that seemed at times threatened, especially in two great depressions, but, if it makes sense to speak of people being held together, was a force that helped hold Australians together in something that they all shared. From being a wild, uncultured waste, so poor and barren that the first explorers shrank back aghast, I said Cardinal Moran in 1883, 'Australia has become a civilised land, clothed with loveliness as a garden. And in his Short History of Australia A.W. Jose wrote in 1909 that we must take seriously in hand the development of the country's natural resources'. To do this methodically, scientifically was Australia's task for the future. Young Australians cannot serve their country better than by preparing themselves with zealous study to take their share in the task directly they become men. New images of national development arose as well as the established images of minefield and farm - In the drained swamps beside Newcastle Harbour there went up the blast furnaces and mills and chimney stacks of the BHP - Between the wars motor vehicle assembly lines, glassworks, textile mills emerged - After the second world war the Holden, "Australia's Own Car" was launched in 1948 as a symbol of national achievement - Visiting the ferro-concrete of the Snowy River Scheme became a national pilgrimage - There was the modernity and progress of manufacturing our own consumer goods - our own Rothman's King Size Filter Cigarettes, our own Sunbeam Electric Frypan ... Qantas Empire Airways dropped the Empire, then internationalised itself as Australia's international airline.

The growth of an environmentalist movement seemed to challenge the firmest of Australian wisdoms - the belief in development at any cost - but environmentalism was negotiable. What was not negotiable, but what ended this great faith (instead of giving it new meaning) were the puzzles of becoming something called The Economy, an abstract idea that took us over in the mid-1980s and began to communicate with us, remotely, in terms of economic indicators released in graphics on television. The Economy was not something of which we could feel a part. Of course, as we moved into the post-industrial society parts of the old economies were falling to bits and remaking themselves in new forms all over the prosperous world but the faith in national development was so ingrained in Australian national definition that the departure of this belief may have weakened our holding together; there was a sense of loss made more real with the failure to come up with a revised version, and made most real by a failure to appear to be sympathetic to unprecedented jolts and uncertainties about what the work force was now supposed to be. With things shaken up without credible explanation as a result of a collapse in political rhetoric, there was, amongst some Australians, a turning back to bits and pieces of old faith. As a crystalliser of attitudes Pauline Hanson's maiden speech in 1996 may have been the most effective maiden speech ever made in the Australian parliament.

It was about here that, instead of speaking, in a way we were getting used to, of a diverse Australia made up of many strands we began to hear the words mainstream and minority interests as if Australians were divided into two main classes - main mob, a uniform class of the good, worthy real Australians (whose grandparents might have laughed at The Bulletin's jokes) and the breakaways, a threatening rabble of un-Australians. The name for these dissidents was minority interests. They were, however, a special kind of minority interest. They weren't natural minority interests like cotton

farmers, or war veterans, or people living under Sydney airline flight paths; they were members of the Aboriginal industry or the multicultural industry, or "the welfare industry", or "femocrats" or "eco nuts". Of course there is nothing unusual in calling your opponents funny names: I fight for diggers rights; you are part of the RSL industry, etc. But the mainstream idea was producing concepts of an Australian normality that made it un-Australian for some people to put up a case for themselves. That was a privilege that applied only to some groups and if it applied to them they weren't really minority groups (although of course they were).

Representative democracy isn't in any classic sense democracy. It is just the best we can do: it leads to a peaceful handing over of power and it means that holding elections can provide some kind of a check on government (although it may not). But we should recognise that when we cast our votes on election day we aren't participants in government: we are simply voters choosing between two or more highly oligarchic party structures (although there can be conflicts among the oligarchs). We can urge efficient balloting. (Something in which all mature representative governments can teach the United States a lesson.) We can urge that a government shouldn't get in when, clearly, a majority of voters don't want it. (Something in which a number of countries can teach Australia a lesson.) But ancient Athens it isn't. (Nor, in many ways, of course, was ancient Athens.) Where the democracy comes into it (liberal democracy anyway) goes beyond voting: it is when we have a chance of participation - in putting our views forward in any legal way we choose and lobbying for our special interests as hard as we can. To recognise the mosaic of minority interests that makes up any modern society is the essential of modern liberal democracy. The alternative view (from the muddy bottom of the mainstream) that the majority is always right is illiberal and authoritarian. We all belong to a political state called the Commonwealth of Australia, of a liberal-democratic, pluralist kind (summoned into existence by a vote from its future citizens); we do not belong to a nation ethnically cleansed of all but arbitrarily-defined typical Australian's. So one essential in holding together is to recognise that the harmony of a society depends partly in recognising the existence of minority interests in that society - cotton farmers, single mothers, RSL branches, Slovene clubs: to see the differences and the conflicts between them and to recognise in these an essential element in a liberal democracy. Or as Professor John Anderson used to say: A variety of organisations is a condition of social life. Or - even better - as Spinoza used to say 300 years before: Since it is impossible to coerce thought, the way to sustain social harmony is to discuss conflict and pursue truth. The more people speak their minds freely, the more they are likely to be loyal citizens. And: That which is forced cannot be sincere. It is not uniformity that produces an harmonious society - neither by physical suppression nor by coercion of opinion. It is by the acceptance of difference, an acquaintance with its perils and its virtues and, humans being what they are, its inevitability. Anything else is, at its most severe, oppressive; and, at its least, superficial and trifling.

For this kind of understanding, in Australia we have to consider, in particular, two words. One is used too often. The other is not used often enough. The first word is "equality".

The second is "tolerance".

"Equality" in Australia has always had within it a tendency towards uniformity - meaning, at its worst, a lowest common denominator equality. Its meaning can take some clarity in equal rights of legal progress, or in equal civic rights or, despite the practical difficulties, in the principles of equal opportunity. But there are those dangerous

moments when equality becomes the respectable face of envy. Over the last few years we have had people who are envious of people on the dole, even envious of indigenous people as a kind of new privileged class. Perhaps there will soon be a movement demanding equal access to night refuges and soup kitchens. In any society there must be hundreds of special cases - perhaps thousands of special cases. A sensible and humane egalitarian does not demand that there be no special cases, but that when it comes to special cases there should be a concern for fairness within them.

Given the almost universal use of whiteness as a definition of Australia, tolerance didn't build up much of a past history - except in the legal religious tolerance that accompanied a fierce sectarianism (and that was an important exception). Otherwise it was to mean little more than acceptance of certain kinds of human failings. (And the list of acceptances was limited at a time of high wowserism, government censorship and police enforcement of certain theories of morality.) When the word has come into use in the last couple of decades it has been attacked by some as patronising, even as an expression of white, male, Anglo-Saxon superiority. This misses the point. Tolerance doesn't mean that we love each other, or respect each other. It means that, in accepting a plurality of values and ways of being human, we accept the right to difference even of people we loathe. It's a way of getting on with each other even when we don't respect each other. Two other quotes from Spinoza: One is: 'To tolerate a group who follow a system of belief or a way of life is not a question of liking, or approving, or agreeing with them. It is a question of accepting their right to be there'. The other quotation is: Being tolerant means you accept people's right to (lawfully) do or say what they like. It also means you have the right to criticise them as stringently as you wish.

Of course, people have all kinds of feelings of belonging. Some Australians are still somewhat obsessed by a nineteenth century definition of Australia as a great patriotic landscape of blue hills, gum trees and kangaroos. Others have turned it into a landscape of threatened wilderness areas inhabited by endangered species. People take pride in patches of Australian history or in recent Australian achievements. Being a modern consumer society they are also bound by the aspirations of the shopping centres and the shopping malls. As a mass entertainment society they take their pick from the same range of entertainment in the TV serials and the sporting programs. Some have a feeling of belonging because they have maintained some of the habits of their homelands in a new country. And there are all kinds of individual feelings about Australia that can mean most to Australians because they are local - about the places where they do their living, and the people they do their living with. And I like to think that there are certain characteristics - essentially superficial, and that's an important part of it - that are often found in the public relations between Australian's that may be one of the things many people have in common. The passage of the Olympic flame was a great example - all these different kinds of people from so many different parts of the country passing on the same flame.

And, of course. Australia has a civil society, the social space beyond that occupied by the state - the place where most people, whether as individuals or groups, get on with much of what interests them and most of the things over which they have some control - and also something a bit different from that: what Martin Krygier has called civil trust - of trust among people who don't and can't know each other intimately but still make judgments, however abstract, about the extent to which they can rely on each other.

But any society contains xenophobes, racists, zealots, bigots, ratbags and other merchants of repressive hatred - and they are often people who are more inflamed to action than most of us by social envy and resentment.

In a liberal-democratic society it is one of the jobs of political leaders to make sure that the main political system is not infected by this kind of influence. Politicians live by division: but they have to know when to stop. There have been great individual performances among politicians (some of which would now be derided as "political correctness"). If the harmony of a society depends partly in recognising the existence of minority interests in that society an excellent example of a political leader's preventative action would be the occasion of Arthur Calwell's launch of the term "New Australians". And for a great collective performance we have the period of effective bipartisanship from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s when there was a refusal to use appeals to certain prejudices as a way of gaining political advantage.

At present we are confronted by two failures. One is the failure in political rhetoric to make sense of economic policy. Max Weber, after working out his list of ways people were likely to justify power, then said that we are also likely to act out of highly robust motives of fear and hope. In Australia those highly robust motives of fear and hope are likely to be concerned with incomes and jobs. That was why the faith in national development worked so well. It offered people a nationally unified notion made up (like the British Empire in its grand days) both of emotion (sometimes even poetry) and self interest. Even at times of depression, people could look forward to a return to normal. Now they no longer know what normal might mean. And no political leader is telling them.

The second failure has come from the inability of our political leaders to speak from time to time to Australians about the civic faiths that most of them share. Yet it is a function of political leaders to enunciate these faiths. Yes, "We are One, but we are [also] Many". The many is self evident. But what makes us One? What can the answer be other than a civic statement, a statement about our basic faiths as a political community? What else have we the right to expect? Wearing bushman's hats? Calling out "Oi, Oi, Oi?" The Commonwealth of Australia is not an ethnic entity. What we hold in common is an imagined civil contract.

The imagined contract is not hard to put into words, although the imagination with which the words can be used would vary according to taste. It might begin with the assumptions that the government itself comes under the law and that the law should be administered predictably and fairly, and with respect for the equality under the law of all Australians. It would, of course, declare that Australia is a liberal parliamentary democracy based on a universal franchise carried out in fair elections and with freedom of opinion. It would make a commitment to upholding Australia as a tolerant society and a fair society devoted to the wellbeing of its people. And since this is Australia it could end with a recognition of the unique status of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Something like this might be seen as the basis of being an Australian. And the alternative? What should we call someone who believes that the government is above the law, that opinion should be standardised, that majorities are born to rule, that minorities endanger social cohesion, that the well being of the Australian people is not a concern of government and that the Abos should have invented the wheel? One might almost be tempted - although of course one would resist the temptation - to call them "un-Australian".