

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

### RECOGNISING DIVERSITY

Barton Lecture No. 3

*Professor Mary Kalantzis*

#### **History by Numbers**

The fetish we have for numbers has just landed us in 2001. And this number tells us it's time to remember an Australian event of a century ago—the Federation of the Australian Colonies. For a few years in the nineties of the twentieth century, it seemed we might have been able to make something of the numerology. We thought we might be able to make the number 2001 iconic of another moment of historical transition. But, for reasons which don't bear repeating, the push to redefine Australia as a republic came unstuck before the anointed year.

Having a moment for national reflection reduced to a mere number is, I suppose, appropriate to our times, metaphysically speaking, as everything in our cultural world is progressively reduced to an invisible base code in which zeros and ones are expanded into multiples of ten before they become words, sounds and images. Despite the rapidity with which we are propelled into the future by the forces of the digital age, paradoxically we seem to have stopped thinking much about the cultural qualities of the present compared with those of the past, let alone about how we might achieve more sociable futures.

The Centenary of Federation was a moment which promised us the opportunity to re-imagine ourselves and take pride in our achievements. But, by and large, we have done little more than attempt to retouch the image of Federation, to retell the story within its original terms of reference. The newspaper stories have been half-hearted. And we have tended to doze off in front of our TV screens when the Federation story comes on, only to be woken by cricket scandals, horror stories from our very own concentration camps, and the tale of the tennis star who defected from an Australia in which she and her family could no longer feel at home to a Yugoslavia in which, it seems, they can.

What a lost opportunity. For by remembering in this purely celebratory but inevitably half-hearted way, we have really been forgetting. Deliberately forgetting.

We are forgetting that the primary motivation for Federation, the only issue on which Australia really wanted to maintain an independent line from London, was race. Federation set in place three distinctively local initiatives: White Australia, protection of the industry and trade of White Men, and a regime of racial separation for Aborigines. The first two provided the new Commonwealth with some of its finest and most impassioned public rhetoric.

The last was a new way of still not having to speak about historical processes which could, had one chosen to talk, with justification have been called invasion and genocide.

Had it been possible in this moment to remember truly, we would have been able to take enormous pride not only in what's the same about Australia in 2001 as in 1901, but in how much we've changed, and we would have been able to take heart also in the promise inherent in this self transformation, the promise of what we could still be. This would have been indeed an interesting story.

Sad to say, I don't think we're good at knowing our history in Australia.

Take one emblematic site in another country with a troubled history—Germany. And whether today's Germany is a country which should be more troubled or less by its history than today's Australia, is an entirely irrelevant question. The site I want to mention is the new Federal Foreign Office, opened in Berlin a year ago. This building is modern Germany's point of contact with the world, a Germany which is today the economic and political linchpin, as well as the future geographical centre, of a Federated Europe. It also houses the new office of the highest ranking Green politician in the world, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer. But it is a building with a terrible and still palpable history. Constructed as the Nazi Reichsbank, the design was personally chosen by Hitler in 1933. The modernist Mies van der Rohe had submitted an entry to the design competition, but the one which was chosen epitomised the emerging Nazi aesthetics.

And then the building lived up to its aesthetics. Not only was this where financing of the Nazi war machine was planned and executed, but reportedly where the gold teeth of Nazi victims were melted down. Then, after the war, it was rebuilt as the offices of the Central Committee of the East German Communist Party. In the 1959 reconstruction, another heavy aesthetic layer was added, the aesthetics of the Stalinist Third International. When the decision was made in 1999 to make this building the new Foreign Office, a furious public debate erupted. The debate was not about whether either of the meanings of the two former layers of history should in any sense be restored, but about how to start history afresh. Were the ghosts in this place so repugnant that it should be demolished?

No, it was decided that the future be made through an act of historical transformation of the old structure, yet an act which is at the same time one of always-having-to-remember. The solution was to leave both of the two former layers of historical meaning partially intact and to add a third layer of meaning to the building—and the ultimate act of aesthetic defiance, the Mies van der Rohe furniture. The hope for the future is in the consciousness of this layering, in the deliberate juxtaposition of motifs from 1933, 1959 and 1999, in remembering the past and deliberately contrasting the past with the present.

This is not the stuff of guilt, or of younger generations having to take personal responsibility for the sins of older generations. Rather, it is an act of moral

self-definition, and the insistence that always, history should be remembered. And this, as the only guarantee that the future will be better.

But what of our capacity to remember?

### **Past as Prologue**

In fact, there are two Australian Federation stories. In the first, our history is entirely different to Germany's. And in the second, we have been similarly modern people.

Federation Story Number One runs like this. The first nation to be founded at the ballot box, Australia is arguably one of the oldest and most stable of liberal democracies. The Federation compact was built on the politics of peaceful compromise rather than bloody revolution. Coming at the end of a decade of virulent class struggle, Federation represents the moment of class accommodation. It was the moment in which the world's first government of the working class was elected—and this with the consent, albeit begrudging and temporary, of the ruling class. It was a moment in which unions were institutionalised as part of the fabric of society, and skirmishes of class conflict regulated through legal processes of industrial arbitration. It was the moment of social welfare, the creation of a basic, living wage, the eight hour day and regulated working conditions. The result was standards of living not rivalled anywhere else in the world, with less disparity in wealth between classes than any other place. This is how Australia averted the communisms and the fascisms which plagued other parts of the world—Germany, for instance.

Australia has also, in this story, been a peaceful place. No wars have been fought on Australian shores. We have fought in other people's wars, to be sure, but provoked none. So, too, we have become a place where our history is not characteristic of our geography. We have been a shining light of Anglo-European progress and civilisation in a region of gross underdevelopment at worst and horribly uneven development at best, governed mostly by authoritarian and often corrupt regimes.

This is the story of the Australian nation on its own terms. By world-historical standards, it's not a bad story, and it's true.

By telling this story in this year of remembering, we have chosen to ennoble the Founding Fathers—and the leading roles they played in the processes of drafting the Constitution, voting for its adoption, and the inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia. We've found these men to be decent, if uninspiring, fellows.

But there's another Federation Story. Only eleven per cent of the adult population was both eligible to vote and bothered to vote in the referendum which created the Commonwealth. The Constitution document, drafted in Australia and subsequently enacted in the Westminster Parliament, is purely procedural, dividing powers between the Commonwealth and the States. It is not even a document that could be called democratic in its fundamental

character. There was no mention of universal franchise (because there wasn't such a franchise; women couldn't vote until the Franchise Act of 1902, an act which at the same time explicitly barred Aborigines from voting). There was no mention of voting as a right (because these rights could be determined in a racially discriminatory way, and were). There was no mention of the rule of law. There was no mention of citizens and their rights (because, Australians were still subjects of the Imperial monarch). There was no mention of freedom of speech or association. And the pinnacle of the Constitutional system was an all-powerful unelected head of state and whose Australian representative could 'at his pleasure' appoint an Executive Council to rule.

This was hardly a moment which could be called the making of a 'nation' in the sense of an independent power whose sovereignty rested in the people. Australia was unequivocally a part of the British Empire, and its people subjects, not citizens. 'We are not disposed to give any countenance to the novel doctrine that there is an Australian nationality as distinguished from a British nationality', the High Court said in 1906.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Federation was not even an act of independence on the part of Australians. Federation was what the Imperial Government had wanted for Australia as early as 1846, a suggestion for local and more consistent self government in the interest of Empire and a suggestion which the colonists had, from London's point of view, been painfully slow to take up.

The one point of difference with the Imperial Government was on the question of race. This was only thing distinctively Australian about Federation, and if there was an Australian nationalism, albeit a relatively weak nationalism, this was its essence. Within the idea of race were the issues of immigration, trade and Aborigines.

Immigration had been, in a practical sense, almost unrestricted until the closing decades of the nineteenth century. This was not just a matter of imperial pragmatics, although it was that—the pragmatics of open borders and open labour markets in the era of *laissez-faire* capitalism, and a pragmatics in which Pacific Island labour was used in the sugar plantations of the tropics and near-tropics, Afghans to drive the camel trains across desert interiors, Chinese to work over the goldfields and set up market gardens, Malays and Japanese to dive for pearls. It was also a matter of Imperial principle. At the Intercolonial Conference of 1896, Mr Chamberlain, Secretary of State for Colonies, reminded the Australians who at the time had resolved to adopt the 'dictation test' to restrict coloured immigration, of their greater imperial responsibilities: 'We ask you also to bear in mind the traditions of Empire, which make no distinction in favour of or against race or colour'.<sup>2</sup>

However, distinctions in favour and against race the Australians nevertheless were to make, and make in no uncertain terms. The first major pieces of legislation in the Commonwealth Parliament were to be the Immigration

---

<sup>1</sup> Attorney General (Commonwealth) v. Ah Sheung. 4CLR 949, 961.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Willard, Myra, *History of the White Australia Policy*, Melbourne University Press, 1923, p.112.

Restriction Act banning coloured immigration, and the Pacific Island Labourers Act to repatriate the South Sea Islanders working in the Queensland sugar plantations.

Imperial principle was replaced by distinctively Australian principle, described, by our first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, in one of his finer rhetorical moments thus:

The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman. There is a deep-set difference, and we see no prospect and no promise of its ever being effaced. Nothing in this world can put these two races upon an equality. Nothing we can do by cultivation, by refinement, or by anything else will make some races equal to others.<sup>3</sup>

The leader of the party of the working class, J.C. Watson, agreed. And on the primary objective of Federation, Alfred Deakin, the first Attorney General, was clear, that, 'we should be one people, and remain one people, without

4

Another Australian difference with the Imperial Government was on the issue of trade. In the mid nineteenth century, at the height of British colonial rule, Australia was a place of *laissez-faire* economics and free trade. Federation marked a sharp turn away from these imperial principles, a turn founded on the idea that the interests of the national economy were antithetical to the interests of international economy in which inferior and lowly paid races might unfairly compete against Australians, whose industry was based on high wages.

So, the Australians erected high tariff walls. After the class conflicts of the 1890s, it was agreed that the state should interfere in the market for the mutual benefit of both classes. Race was the lynchpin in the compromise between classes, the agreement to civilise capitalism. The material benefits of industrial arbitration could only be afforded with the protection of high tariff barriers. It was only possible to replace the South Sea Island labourers on the sugar cane fields of north eastern Australia with better paid white labour if there was a tariff on sugar imports and a bounty on sugar production.

Insofar as Federation was a moment of nation-making, and insofar as there was something happening which was different to simply being Subjects of Empire, it was around a package of compromises to regulate the market, and this for the benefit of a nation personified as 'Australians'. Tariffs protected not the rights of man, but the rights of 'Australians' against the unfair competition of other races.

The other main difference between Australians and the Imperial Government was over Aborigines. In the relative silence which continued to veil the

---

<sup>3</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 26 September 1901, p.5233.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Willard, *op.cit.*, p.110.

processes of invasion and genocide, Federation marked a new way of not speaking about the fate of formerly sovereign indigenous nations.

Or, at least, barely speaking about them, or speaking about them only in order to state how they would not be spoken about. Aboriginal people were only mentioned twice in the new Constitution—and both times to legislate their absence in Section 51 (xxvi), and Section 127 .

This framework for not speaking about Aborigines was quite new, and locally devised. For at the height of British colonial rule a serious effort had been made, if not always successfully, to ensure that Aborigines enjoyed certain rights and, at the very least, these were the rights of people who had become British subjects by virtue of conquest. They could not be murdered indiscriminately; their lands could not be taken without compensatory measures; their lives could not be disrupted without assuming some kind of duty of care. This tradition began with Governor Phillip's instructions to negotiate with the inhabitants of the continent in Sydney in 1788. It was an approach that continued through to Colonial Secretary Earl Grey's instructions in the late 1840s that the colonies were to establish large-scale reservations for Aborigines so they could continue to provide for themselves. Grey also insisted that the pastoral leases, which recognised the expanding squatter settlement, were for pasturage only and that Aboriginal people had 'mutual' property rights. The reality, however, was an unspoken war on the part of the frontiersmen who couldn't be further away from London, geographically speaking as well in their own intentions and actions. The truths of invasion and the destruction of Indigenous nations during the Colonial period were the silent and mostly illegal *modus operandi* of the so-called 'settlers'.

This ineffectual imperial framework of rights was abandoned in the era of Federation. A new way of not having to speak about Aborigines, called without irony 'Aboriginal Protection', emerged around the time of Federation and was to last half way into the twentieth century. This evolved into a system which institutionalised Aboriginal people on reserves—a system so authoritarian as to amount in many cases almost to incarceration. Aborigines were put into the same category as prisoners and lunatics in a society which was, at the time, busily setting up 'modern' institutions to remove every manner of social evil and such evils out of sight and, therefore, out of mind. At the same time, 'mixed race' children were removed from the reserves and from their families. It was thought that interbreeding with whites would at least give them a chance. For the remaining Aborigines, however, it was a matter of 'smoothing the pillow of a dying race' to quote a phrase in common use at the time. As an inferior race and a primitive culture, modern rationality held they were destined to disappear. Racial segregation, removal of citizenship rights—this was the new nation's new solution to the burden of a history which had begun with invasion and ended in genocide.

## True to Ourselves

When we dare to tell this second, more difficult story of Federation, it's a modern story which is in its fundamental shape is not dissimilar to Germany's. The big picture ideas are no different to those of the German thirties and forties: of the necessity to create 'one people, ... without admixture of races' (to use Deakin's words again); of unbridgeable racial inferiority; of races destined to die out; and of the eugenics of progress. Nor were the technologies of race management so dissimilar: the enforced separation in concentration camps; the petty regulation of freedoms of movement and association. Nor too were the effects so different—in the Australian case, a genocide in which ninety per cent of the Aboriginal population died over the period of a century, and the wholesale destruction of peoples with distinctive languages and ways of life.

In the first story of Federation, 1901 represents a high point in Australian history. In the second story, it is probably the lowest. Told on its own, story one is a way of using the process of remembering in order to forget, of selective memory as a way of forgetting through omission.

Story two is of course a much harder one to tell as it is bound up with the problem of how to remember things which you don't want to remember, of recalling things which are painful to remember. The problem, of course, is that there are not really two stories. The logic of Federation in the second version of events was inseparable from the logic of the first. To be true to ourselves, we must struggle to tell both stories as one.

This is not for the sake of wallowing in angst, or using the sins of past generations to visit the consciences of present generations. This is no black armband view of history, no uncovering of truths which require us forever to mourn. If race was the primary motivating force for Federation, it is hardly worth asking whether the Australian solution was right for then. The only point it is that it is wrong for now, an utterly unconscionable means to achieve any contemporary or future end. When it comes to the past, guilt is of no use. We just need recognition, and perhaps even retrospective forgiveness for those who were creatures of their time and who did incidental, collateral harm rather than premeditated harm.

The good thing about the Federation story, the whole story in which version one and version two of historical events are inseparable, is not just the version one continuities, but the version two transformations. This is how even version two of the story can become a source of pride

Immigration. Over the second half of the twentieth century, we have had the largest immigration program of any country in the world relative to the existing population, bar the peculiar case of Israel. This led to the enactment of the Australian Citizenship Act in 1948. The population has grown from seven to nineteen million, half the consequence of immigration. Forty-one per cent of the Australian population has one parent born overseas. It has also been the most diverse program of any country in the world. The society that has been

created can only be described as multicultural, a term now used universally, but which slipped into the lexicon in Australia before any other place in the world, bar Canada, where it meant something less than its Australian and now contemporary international meanings. The multicultural idea came to be used as a policy prescription from the mid seventies, as a series of cultural rights and as a framework through which government would relate to civil society. This development coincided with the first large scale influx of non-white immigrants since the nineteenth century, and the definitive demise of the practice of White Australia.

Trade. We've progressively shifted our view of the world, from being an alien place populated with hostile outsiders to a place of exchange and opportunity. As a percentage of national product, Australia is one of the most export-oriented countries on earth. The basis for this exchange has also changed. Whereas the Federation compact quarantined Australia in order to protect the living standards of white men, we now set out to exchange things on the market because they are things we are particularly good at making or doing. And we have progressively shifted our exports away from commodities and raw materials towards value added products and high contact quintessentially inter-cultural industries such as education and tourism. You are what you do, and the frame of reference within which you do it changes your sensibilities. From being a parochial country which fears the outside world, we have become a cosmopolitan nation which reaches out and engages with the world.

Indigenous peoples. The 1967 referendum removed the sections of the Constitution which excluded Aborigines from the Commonwealth. The 1992 Mabo decision recognised residual rights to Crown Lands. The 1996 Wik decision recognised overlapping rights of Aboriginal people in the pastoral leases which cover forty percent of the continent. The 'Bringing them Home' report of 1997 documented and recognised the iniquities of removing so-called mixed race children from their Aboriginal parents, and the racial theories upon which this practice was based. In 2000, the Reconciliation movement brought out the largest crowds to support any social or political cause in Australian history, in a statement of support for an accommodation between Indigenous and settler societies. And now, there's serious discussion of the possibility of a Treaty which recognises the sovereign rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations.

Despite all the progress we have made, there can be little doubt that the bonds of our civil society have become frayed in recent years—the disengagement of government from the Reconciliation process, the retreat from multiculturalism, the paranoia about immigration and refugees, the anxiety about our neighbours and globalisation.

We need urgently to renew our civic soul, to engage seriously and honestly with Indigenous issues, to appreciate how immigration contributes to our economy and remaking of our local identity, to define who we are in Asia, facilitate our global economic interests and to create a modern democratic constitution that truly represents what we have become and still can be.

On the question of our Constitution there is an enormous amount to be done; a question which is much larger than deleting from the text mention of a completely ineffectual Head of State. We have a *de facto* democracy but not a *de jure* democracy, a country which functions like a democracy but without a democratic constitution. The Australian Constitution is a profoundly flawed and inadequate document, a document which does little service to any of the principles, rights and responsibilities of democracy. In fact, we have a constitution, which in places includes shameful legacies, which continue vividly to express the spirit of the time of its drafting. Section 25 which still makes 'provisions as to races disqualified from voting', is a case in point.

### **Nation without Ethnos**

At root, the men of 1901 were facing the same issue we face in 2001, the issue of identity and the dynamics of belonging. It's just that in one respect, our response to this issue today is—and must be—diametrically opposed to theirs. This opposition turns on one word: diversity.

Our Founding Fathers responded to diversity in the process of forging Australian identity and creating a sense of belonging to the new nation with the formula: one people, one culture, one nation. It drew a neat boundary which defined who could belong and on what terms.

But how must we respond today in an era of ever more intensely localised identity politics and globalised structures which promote rapidly increasing inter-cultural contact?

Answers to this conundrum have already been created, tested and reworked in Australia, more usefully in the second half of the twentieth century than in the first. In our workplaces, we have developed a kind of productive diversity in which differences are the wellspring of energy and creativity, and diversity is used as a resource to reach into local niche and dispersed local markets. In our civic lives, we have created the idea of multiculturalism, not just as a description of the brightly coloured wallpaper that is our contemporary cultural reality—the stuff of festivals and street parades—but also as a series of local agreements, founded on a new social contract, to live together in our difference. And in our personal lives, we have become new people, more outward looking, more cosmopolitan, more tolerant.

A lot is bundled into this idea diversity. It's not just based in differences in ethnic origins, or the differences between Indigenous and settler experiences. It's also captured in the spirit of the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, the biggest event in the Australian calendar as well as the biggest event of its kind in the world. And, more broadly, the way we live in and with our diversity is the sign of a deep epistemological and moral shift, a shift in the way we understand our identities and the ways in which we make the accommodations that add up to sociability. We have, in short, managed in fits and starts to build a new ethics, as well as a new pragmatics, of cohabitation.

This trajectory represents a kind of historical journey, and by following the direction of that journey, we can perhaps divine our country's destiny. We have been on the way to creating a state without ethnos, and a community without nation. We have been developing a post-nationalist civics, after a world-century which was wracked by selective inclusions and often vicious exclusions on the basis of ethnos or race. This destiny, both as an ideal and as a pragmatic reading of the flow of our history, I would call a state of 'Civic

Negotiating diversity is now the only way to produce social cohesion. Pluralistic citizenship is the most effective way of holding things together; and that an outward looking, internationalist approach to the world is now the only way to maintain the national interest. This requires a paradoxical new universal in which negotiating differences becomes the national essence. And the state needs to assume a dual task: to develop community whilst securing diversity; and to create pathways for all whilst respecting differences. This won't happen automatically. Indeed, it might not happen at all. But it is something that needs to be imagined as a possibility, an ideal for which we can strive.

We have not yet been sufficiently clear-sighted to write down what it is we have achieved, not in a constitutional sense and not even in our contemporary re-tellings of the Federation story. Hope lies in the everyday, in the inchoate flows of civil society, in organic processes of self-transformation which often slip our attention.

We're a lucky country, as Donald Horne famously has told us, prosperous and comfortable despite our leaders. And, from this truth, will surely emerge a modern democratic constitution, a flag which includes all of us, affinity with our region, inclusive symbols of belonging and a treaty with the sovereign nations which were displaced without negotiation by the British Empire and its successor, the Commonwealth of Australia.

In the first week of the new Australian century, I attended a wedding in Townsville. The marriage was between a young woman of Irish Catholic background and a young Aboriginal man. Her parents are academics, and they had brought up their children the Kimberley and the USA before moving to Townsville—Celtic people of the world and Australians through and through. His family was from Palm Island, tropical paradise and, not so long ago, hellish concentration camp. He had played Rugby League for the North Queensland Cowboys, then become a plumber. Both were now students at the University, the young woman studying business and the young man medicine. These achievements went barely remarked in the many speeches. This is Australia, and achievement sometimes come easily. The cultural heritages were interwoven: clapsticks and brolga dancing; larrikin exuberance and Irish irreverence; all mixed with lace and flowers and pale blue bridesmaids. This is Australia, a place of sometimes easy diversity.

Marriage vows, white dresses, tiered wedding cakes. And other Australian touches, like the *bonbonnieres*—those fancy little parcels of sugared almonds traditionally distributed at Greek and Italian weddings as a symbol of fertility. No, not Greek or Italian any longer, but near-universal in North Queensland, where the migrants in the sugar industry have turned something exotic and strange into something ordinary and touching. Something for everybody.

This is Australia, one hundred years after Federation.

---

**Mary Kalantzis** is Professor of Education and Executive Dean of the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services at RMIT University. Her most recent book, with Bill Cope, is *A Place in The Sun: Re-creating the Australian Way of Life*, Harper Collins, Sydney 2000.