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THE AUSTRALIAN

CREATING THE FUTURE

WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN, SATURDAY 20 JUNE 1992

AUSTRALIA - REDISCOVERING SELF-CONFIDENCE

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No doubt about it. Australia is going through a rough patch. A time of restless self-doubt.

The causes? Perhaps the approaching end of the century. The new millennium opens: where will it end? Perhaps it is the unemployment with its toll on the self-esteem of a million employable citizens. Perhaps it comes from the evidence of youth despair, family break-up or drugs in the streets. The desertion of the country towns does not help. The collapse of manufacturing industry and the drying up of traditional markets seem to threaten our future.

Some will feel discouraged by the advance of Asian societies, not so long ago ruled by the likes of us. No longer is Australia a vital part of a world-wide empire, coloured pink. Suddenly, we see ourselves as a sparsely populated continent, a relatively minor power on the edge of awakening Asia with its profoundly different cultures. Are we just a geographic anachronism? A left-over of European power, when the ships have sailed home and our great and powerful friends have lost interest? Melancholy thoughts like this are about just now. Not a very good basis on which to create the future of Australia. What we need is a renewal of national self-confidence. Only this will be a pre-condition for building a

sustainable place for Australia and Australians amongst the people of the world. So, without forgetting our problems and our fellow citizens in difficulty, I want to think positively for a moment.

Everyone is now saying that we should imitate the nations of Asia. But the people of crowded Asia enjoy nothing like the natural conditions which we take for granted every day. The world should have a new scale for deciding comparative standards of living. We should not let the economists loose on the evaluation of such a nebulous condition. It may be a state of mind which has more to do with quality of life, hours of sunshine, access to sports and culture than raw GDP per capita. After all, it is what you do with your little share of the GDP that counts; not how many coins you have rattling around in your pocket.

In most lists portraying the comparative standards of living of the people of the world, the United States is placed above Australia. It is a wonderful country. It is still an admirable engine of ideas. But I never cease to be amazed at the number of beggars on the streets of the cities or the level of social problems I see when I go there. When I think of the patients living with AIDS and compare their predicament in the United States with the way we have handled that problem in Australia, I am sure that there is a lot to be said for our quality of life and its measure of compassion.

Economists and politicians can try as they will to make us a striving, enterprising society of selfish go-getters. They will have some success at the margins. User-pays will seduce a few. But the proponents basically come up against two difficulties of which they should be aware. The first is the Australian weather. The second is the Australian ethos.

Even economists cannot change the weather. On a sunny weekend you have to be a workaholic judge or a businessman with a very big

overdraft to be found away from the recreational pursuits which consume most Australians. That is just the nature of our sunny country. We may have north European genes burning in our blood, urging us to strive and work. But the torpor of the sunshine works its Mediterranean charm upon succeeding generations. This is a fact which cannot be ignored. And who is to say that walking in the bush or sitting by the glistening sea with a glass of wine is not a better way for a human being to pass a day than in the traffic jams of Tokyo or the congested concrete blocks of Seoul?

The Australian ethos is unashamedly egalitarian. I have tried for years to get people in Australia interested in the special needs of gifted and talented children. It is an uphill battle. For many, the idea offends the ingrained rule of equality in Australian life. The needs of gifted children may be economically essential if we are to compete with our neighbours. I may urge the principle of equal opportunity for the talented in education. But deaf ears greet this instruction. With few exceptions, the great mass of Australians aspire to excellence in one thing only - sport. I may despair at this. But I can jump up and down as much as I like and I will not change these features of Australians. Truly astonishing it is to talk with taxi drivers from countries as far apart as Lebanon and Uruguay and to find how captivated they are with cricket. They learn it through their children. Cricket of all things! Probably the best way to raise Australia's national morale just now and to kick-start economic revival would be for our athletes to win Gold! Gold! Gold! at the Olympics.

Yet a country which concerns itself so obsessively with sport may confine its battles and tensions to the playing fields. Its people may grow up with a health mixture of individual prowess in a team environment. They may learn to lose gracefully as well as to

win heroically. Inculcated in them may be acceptance of an umpire and compliance with the sensible rules of the game. These are not bad characteristics by which to live in harmony and tolerance in a sunshine society.

When last year I won the Australian Human Rights Medal, the awards ceremony proved a humbling experience for me. It began with acknowledgment to Aboriginal Australians. It moved through citizens who had shared their crises and solutions with fellow Australians. It honoured Stuart Challender, whose last noble symphony of courage and instruction was shared with us all. A poet from the Greek community in Australia honoured his new land in the tongue of Shakespeare. A film on Lionel Murphy's life showed how our highest court had upheld the right to be an agitator. Even in the ceremony a citizen interrupted to call attention to the suffering of the people of East Timor. Australians can speak up for things that touch them deeply. They will not be shot at dawn for doing so. Surrounded by such citizens of a free country I felt proud to be a member of such a society.

Of course there is much to be done. But even in hard economic times Australians should not forget to count their blessings. When we feel confused about GST or depressed about GDP we should think of the things that are still going for Australia. The beauty of the eucalypts. The din the cicadas in summer. The austere grandeur of the Red Centre. The hardworking travel industry servicing the visitors who often value this land more than we do. The institutes of scientific excellence. The opera, theatre and ballet which is so often unsurpassed. A country of peaceful agitators and progressive thinkers. Of universities of world class. Of independent judges. Of democratic political change by the ballot box.

The world we live in today is increasingly integrated. The

flash at Hiroshima signalled the beginning of the end of the nation state. We are linked to people in every land by our shared environment, integrated economies, common human rights, telecommunications, the jumbo jet and nascent world government. This is no time for jingoistic nationalism in the South Seas. But a country which has so quickly abandoned white Australia, rejected integration and embraced tolerant multiculturalism gives a lead to the whole world. If we can build, in Australia, a multicultural community, we will provide a worthy model for the whole planet in the millennium that approaches. In microcosm, Australia may become an example to every country - a land of tolerance and diversity. This is not a bad objective for us to aspire to. It is one suitable to the new international age. It is one worthy of a people who aspire to a special place in the sun.