

THE BICENTENARY: CELEBRATION OR APOLOGY?

by *Dr. Ken Baker*

Australia's Bicentenary is only three years away. How we choose to celebrate it should reflect the pride most Australians feel about their country. Plans recently produced by the Australian Bicentennial Authority, however, suggest that confidence in Australia's best traditions is lacking among the Bicentenary organisers .

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The Australian Bicentennial Authority has released its national programme of projects and events (**Bicentenary 88: Special Issue**). This programme, writes the Chairman of the ABA, Mr. J. B. Reid, 'provides the focus and overall direction for the Bicentennial Year. It includes a range of special Bicentennial projects and establishes guidelines for future activities'. The National Programme provides the strongest indication to date of the philosophy of the ABA, the things it considers worth celebrating, the achievements, traditions, values and institutions which it sees as central to the Australian identity and the foundations of Australian society.

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The problem with the document is that it tends to relegate to the margins of history, or even ignore altogether, many of the very things that most Australians would view as central to the unity and identity of the nation. Moreover, some of the programme's themes are those that currently divide the nation. Its tendency is to sacrifice tradition to current fashion, and even then only to the fashionable concerns of a minority.

While the programme does outline plans and establish guidelines, it is nevertheless, as the ABA points out, only a 'starting point'. There is still time to ensure that the weaknesses and gaps are rectified. This article is written in the hope that it might contribute to this task by identifying areas where the programme is vulnerable to criticism.

First, the symbolic value of the Bicentenary needs to be recognised.

The Bicentenary due in 1988 provides an opportunity for reminding us that much of what we value in Australian society — the freedom, the security, the standard of living — are not the inevitable accompaniments of being human, but depend upon a framework of institutions established over time which, in an important sense, embody the accumulated wisdom of past generations. Even a cursory glance at the plight of the modern world ought to convince us that Australia possesses rare, hard-won achievements worth celebrating and worth defending.

The sense of having inherited a worthy past is essential to providing the spiritual resources necessary to face the future with confidence and to feel part of a national community.

Of course not all that Australia today has inherited from the past deserves

celebration. But the likelihood of the Bicentenary turning into an orgy of self-congratulation is slim. On the whole, Australians seem temperamentally disinclined to displays of jingoism or excessive, rose-tinted sentiment. The risks of the Bicentenary going badly lie elsewhere.

A danger faced by all modern Western nations, Australia included, is in failing sufficiently to assert the worth and authority of their traditions. The potential consequences of this failure lie in producing a generation of rootless, purposeless individuals, full of resentment against the society that has disinherited them. A nation that fails to impart the things it values to its young has stopped caring for them.

The Bicentenary's function should be to remind us of the achievements of the past 200 years, of our debt to our forebears, and our obligations to future generations.

Unfortunately, much of what we as Australians value we tend to take for granted. But if encouraged to reflect, most Australians would probably include the following as central to the quality of their lives: their family, the rule of law, a relatively high standard of living, individual freedom, the extent to which fairness and opportunity are available to all in this country and, while Australians are not notably religious, the vast majority do recognise and value the Christian foundations of their culture.

Indeed, as indicated by opinion polls, the key institutions on which this nation has been built receive strong support. The central role of the family, the Federal Constitution, the Monarchy, free enterprise, the legal system all receive overwhelming endorsement by Australians. Australians

have a strong sense of national pride. The Australian Values Study Survey revealed that some ninety per cent of Australians expressed pride in their country — a figure exceeded only by the U.S.A. Australians also express support for the Flag as a national symbol.

The Programme

In 1979 the former Prime Minister, Mr. Fraser, announced the Government's intention to establish The Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA) to plan and manage a national programme of celebrations. The Authority was given a broad charter in its Memorandum of Association. Among other things, it was to recommend the theme and focus of the Bicentenary, encourage initiatives and stimulate 'throughout the Australian community an enduring consciousness of the historical basis and the significance of the commemoration of the Bicentennial'.

Initially, the theme of the Bicentenary was to be 'The Australian Achievement'. The ABA has since rejected this in favour of the motto 'Living Together'. While this motto is inoffensive, except perhaps to those sensitive to its connotations of cohabitation, it is also utterly uninspiring. On the other hand it does capture a key aspect of the ABA's apparent image of Australia as an amalgam of diverse (alternative?) lifestyles.

Characteristic is the ABA's announcement of the Bicentennial Encyclopedia of the Australian People, described as aiming to 'document the diverse origins and ways of life of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders and the different cultural groups which have settled in Australia in successive waves of immigration'.

Overlooked is the central importance of Christian values to the foundations of Australia's heritage

The image stressed here and in other places in the ABA document is of a nation of varied cultures and origins, but one without a unifying core. As is often the case, what is included is less cause for concern than what is selectively excluded

The Omissions

There is nothing objectionable in the Bicentenary recognising the diversity of Australians. But to speak of diversity without also focussing on the major sources of unity and commonality in the society produces a lopsided and artificial view. The fact is that, despite the variety of origins of Australians, by far the greatest single debt, in terms of the origins of our institutions, is to Britain. But quite remarkably, nowhere in the Bicentennial programme is this fact acknowledged. The programme fails to mention the shared institutional framework, British in origin, which guarantees the right of all Australians, regardless of background, to equality before the law, participation in the political process, freedom of expression etc — the very things that migrants and refugees have often come to Australia in search of. A strength of Australia's institutions has been their capacity to assimilate groups from varied backgrounds, but the stress on multiculturalism in the ABA document overlooks this.

While the programme fails to give due recognition to the British contribution to Australia's heritage, it singles out the history and contribution of the Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders for special attention.

Also overlooked is the central importance of Christian values to the foundations of Australia's heritage and the existence of a shared ethical code. Instead we are offered the nebulous claim that 'there are many and diverse spiritual values in Australia' and the hope that the Bicentenary will 'facilitate inter-faith dialogue'.

No mention occurs of outstanding leaders in Australia's history or of the fact that 1988 will mark 200 years of this country as a constitutional monarchy, over 130 years as a parliamentary democracy and 87 years of federalism.

The Authority's plans seem peculiarly blind to the role of institutions and organisations in building a nation. They focus on sweeping concepts of race (European/black), community, age group, gender and so on. But the mechanisms of progress — organisations and institutions with enlightened leadership — seem to be at best marginal to the Authority's view of Australia's development.

One institution, however, which is featured for its role in building the nation is the trade union movement. The Bicentenary, we are informed, aims to 'celebrate the trade unions' contribution to the development of modern Australia and their continuing role in maintaining the welfare of the workforce'. Well and good! But nowhere is there a comparable reference to the contribution of private enterprise, a contribution even more readily recognised by most Australians. Is the Bicentenary to be an extension of the Accord?

An international competition giving 'young tradespeople an opportunity to demonstrate a wide variety of trade and practical skills to the public' is planned for 1988. While no comparable ceremonial recognition is apparently to be given to

Our Achievements, Our Culture, Our Alliances

Prominent Australians have recorded many of Australia's achievements which have been overlooked in the ABA's plans

Democracy

'The free parliamentary system of this country ... is the chief instrument of the freedom that we are striving to preserve.'

John Curtin,
quoted in Irene Dowsing,
Curtin of Australia,
Melbourne, Acacia Press, 1969.

The Constitution

'Australia must be counted as one of the world's most successful federations — along with the U.S.A, Canada and Switzerland'.

Ursula Hicks, **Federalism:
Failure and Success**
Melbourne, Macmillan, 1978

'By the common standards of democratic societies our constitution has succeeded in any number of ways. It has succeeded in authorising and holding a nation together. It has succeeded in developing a will for law and order. It has succeeded in providing and proving the possibility for growth and development when there is an initiative and consensus. It has succeeded in making and extending the virtues of choice by defusing the centres of authority.'

Professor Rufus Davis,
'Evaluating Australia's Constitution',
IPA Review, Winter, 1983.

Prosperity and Hard Work

'The development of Australia rates as one of mankind's great achievements..... One of the most advanced and prosperous societies on earth has been created. It is an achievement with few parallels in the history of human adventure...There are more tales of heroism and sacrifices in the penetration of the Australian Outback than in the whole history of the American Far West'.

Paul Johnson,
The Age, January 22, 1983

British Heritage

'I cannot go anywhere in Australia without being reminded of our British inheritance; our system of responsible government and Parliamentary institutions, our adherence to the rule of law and, indeed, our systems of law themselves; our traditions of integrity in high places and incorruptibility in our civil service. We derived all these things from Westminster. Our language comes to us from Britain and so does the bulk of our literature. To have no love for a relatively small community in the North Sea which created and handed on these vital matters would to my mind be a miserable act of ingratitude.'

Sir Robert Menzies,
The Measure of Years,
Melbourne, Cassell Australia Ltd.

World War II Alliance with America

'It was clear to us that without the material and moral backing of the people of the United States of America our cause, however right, would lack the strength requisite for its vindication'.

John Curtin,
quoted in Irene Dowsing,
Curtin of Australia,
Melbourne, Acacia Press, 1969

Our Civilisation

'Achievements for me are facets of our civilisation which advance human dignity, spiritual strength, the possibility of wise judgement and expanded awareness of the nature of man and his place in the universe. There are many such achievements, and there is far too little acknowledgement of them — in my view — in the present day.

Our civilisation will die unless we believe in it, and we will not believe in it unless we recognise that there have been magnificent accomplishments and that we are justified in feeling pride in them and teaching our children to feel pride in them also'.

Professor David Kemp,
'Freedom and the Achievements of Western Civilisation', **Quadrant**, December, 1984.

entrepreneurs, the trades competition is welcome for the value it places on practical achievement. It is only one event, however, in a programme that adopts recreation and leisure as a major theme: 'Leisure in the Age of Technology', 'a national art award incorporating a sport and recreation theme', 'a publication on the history of leisure and recreation', 'a national leisure education curriculum for schools', 'an urban development competition aimed at improvement of leisure and recreation activities', 'food and wine festivals' and so on. The truth is, however, as Paul Johnson has written (see box), the prosperity and strength of Australia was built on the work ethic — hard work under harsh natural conditions. If Australia is to maintain an economically competitive place in the world the virtues of entrepreneurship and productive work, not leisure and recreation, need to be stressed.

Little sense of national identity is conveyed by the Bicentennial Authority's plans.

'Women's activities' also receive special emphasis in the Bicentennial plans. Yet no mention is made of programmes to support the institution of the family, or highlight the threats to family stability. The only mention of the family is under the heading 'Futures Project'. We are asked to consider 'What do the young see as our future goals? Will the family survive in the next 200 years? What role will women play in shaping new directions in Australian life?'

It is also notable that the Australian Flag does not appear anywhere in the booklet, despite there being no shortage of other illustrations. In fact the ABA has adopted its own flag for the Bicentenary. But this is

to misunderstand the nature of symbols. The Australian Flag arouses pride because it symbolises a worthy heritage; it touches the source of our identity as Australians. A new flag, no matter how aesthetically appealing, cannot do this.

Similarly, the booklet makes no reference to the spirit of Anzac, overlooking the impact of the two World Wars on our history and the values of patriotism, self-sacrifice and courage embodied in the Anzac tradition. Plans mentioned to stage a military tattoo and naval review do not adequately capture the central place of Anzac in the Australian identity. Patsy Adam Smith in her best selling book, *The Anzacs*, addresses our forefathers in terms that underline the dictum, 'Lest we forget':

'You had the greatest number of casualties per men on the field of all the allied armies, you travelled the furthest, were away the longest. You were the only volunteers. You came from a newer land, you were a younger race than those who entered that awful arena. When time has removed this age to a distance, your descendants will speak of you as we now speak of the 'three hundred' at Thermopylae.'

Not, it must be said, if the ABA's programme is any guide.

The sense of national identity is built around shared attachments to symbols. The exclusion from the booklet of key symbols in Australian culture such as the Flag and Anzac, and the stress on diversity of values and lifestyles means that little sense is conveyed of what is distinctive about being Australian.

As Australia's links with the world are to be a theme of the celebration in 1988, it would also seem an appropriate occasion to recognise the existence of Australia's

historically important alliance with the USA and that country's contribution to Australia's defence, particularly in World War II. This is not done. Nor is Australia's place in the Commonwealth recognised, although it is the Commonwealth which underpins our relationships with many of the nations of the Indian and Pacific oceans which the booklet does mention.

A Political Programme?

There should be broad agreement that the ABA should avoid tackling issues which tend to divide the nation — matters which, while often valid in themselves, are better left to our political processes. The reason for this is obvious. The Authority should aim at securing bipartisan support; its endorsement or encouragement of contentious issues would destroy this support and play into the hands of marginal activist groups who would use 1988 as a focal point for radical change.

The sense of achievement ought to be central to the spirit of the Bicentenary.

Yet the ABA booklet does tackle selected controversial issues — such as race relations, the role of women and multiculturalism. At the same time it ignores other issues of much greater moment to many Australians—falling standards in education, an industrial relations system which condemns many of our young people to unemployment, family breakdown, and the threats to democracy from the increasing influence of big government, big business and big unions.

Elsewhere, the ABA's General Manager, Dr. David Armstrong, has made explicit his own feelings on the race relations issue, claiming that he would not want to be involved in a Bicentenary 'that does not

THE VOICE OF A JEWISH REFUGEE

'My parents and I, as Russian Jews living in Nazi Germany, came to Australia, quite literally, to escape death. So have many others, and not only Jews, and not only from Nazi Germany. I have remained here because there is much about Australia that I admire and cherish: its genuine political democracy, its genuine freedom of speech..... its reluctance to interfere directly in the affairs of fellow-citizens....

'There is a strident, but I believe small section of the population today that is concerned to put ideology above everything: to force people to care, to awaken in Australians, for example, a sense of guilt for their 'racism', intolerance, narrow-mindedness, etc...

'Even Aborigines, who have been treated very badly and often still are, now have more reason to hope for the future than indigenous peoples anywhere except Canada and Scandinavian countries. They are in a better political and cultural position than any minority in the Third World, or in the communist countries, or in most other countries.

'Australia does not have to become a republic, substitute 'Australian' law for common law, stop talking about the Westminster system and launch campaigns to 'modify' the behaviour of its citizens to make me or many other non-Anglo-Saxon migrants feel at home. On the contrary, when it does so, I will begin to worry....'

Eugene Kamenka,
Professor of History of Ideas
at the Australian National
University, *Canberra Times*,
August 16, 1984

address the running sore of black/white relations in this country. If it is to be a white wank', he has said, 'I want nothing to do with it'. And indeed this year the ABA dropped plans to stage a large-scale re-enactment in 1988 of the arrival of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove, partly on the grounds that such an event would be offensive to Aborigines. At the same time, however, Dr. Armstrong has called 'absolutely legitimate' any event that might be staged by Aborigines in remembrance of the 'Myall Creek massacre, however painful that might be to White Australians'. Dr. Armstrong has also argued that unless governments make 'significant gestures' to Aboriginal people in the areas of housing, land rights, education, welfare and health, the Bicentenary will have a hollow ring.

Whatever the validity of such views, it is simply not appropriate for Dr. Armstrong to politicise the Bicentenary in this way.

The issue here is not whether the Bicentenary should show respect to Aborigines and their traditional culture. It should. Rather it is whether guilt about the settlement of Australia by Britain is to be a guiding sentiment of the celebrations.

There is little doubt that the coming of Europeans to Australia's shore had a detrimental impact on the culture of the Aborigines. As Geoffrey Blainey has written, the Aborigines may well have been happier if they had been able to continue to live in isolation, insulated from the outside world. But such a proposition is unrealistic in the modern world and in many ways, as Blainey continues, "the European history of this land has been a remarkable achievement".

"It is true", he writes, "that the coming of Europeans was at first a tragedy for most Aborigines, but we

overlook the infinitely larger number of lives that were saved — and are still saved in the Third World — by the food and fibres grown by the new settlers in Australia.

We forget that the Aborigines, not through their own fault, had sat on rich resources and been unable to use them.

In the past hundred years, tens of millions of lives have been made possible, and tens of millions of lives have been saved, by the more efficient use of those soils which the Aborigines neglected."

This sense of achievement ought to be central to the spirit of the Bicentenary. There is no turning back the clock to recreate the insularity on which the survival of Aboriginal culture was ultimately dependent. For the Bicentenary to focus unduly on the damage done to Aboriginal culture by white settlement or on racial conflict will serve only to foster resentment and division in the community. Moreover, to rewrite Australia's past as a story of destruction and persecution will ultimately work to undermine the legitimacy of existing institutions inherited from the past.

Given the series of omissions and the special emphases in the Bicentennial programme (see table on page 182 for a summary), the suspicion arises that the hidden agenda of the ABA is to enact a subtle rewriting of Australia's history. This impression is reinforced when we learn of plans to invite 'distinguished Australians and international guests ... to challenge our views on a range of topics' and the intention to establish a 'national review' of all aspects of education relevant to the study of Australia — including Aboriginal studies and women's studies.

The rhetoric of 'community' is plentiful in the Bicentennial programme, yet the document seems strangely out of touch

with many of the core values, traditions and sources of national pride of Australians. Does the change of the official motto for the Bicentenary from 'The Australian Achievement' to the insipid 'Living Together' speak of a loss of confidence by the ABA in Australia's achievements? Are we to read the neglect of the Christian and British foundations of Australia in the Bicentennial programme as a hint that such things are best forgotten? Hopefully not, for the Bicentennial celebrations ought to encourage us to value our traditions and achievements, not expunge them.

The Authority will receive no thanks from the community or the Government (going to an election in 1987) if controversy surrounding its plans should persist. It is no defence for the ABA to argue that its more vaguely worded plans provide sufficient scope to incorporate the neglected themes, such as those listed in the table, at a future date. The ABA should review its national programme to ensure that it explicitly incorporates such themes and so better reflects the core values and sources of pride of most Australians.

The Bicentennial Agenda

This table sets out some of the themes, institutions and groups singled out for special attention in the ABA's programme. The right hand column lists themes not covered in the programme.

THE CURRENT BICENTENNIAL PROGRAMME

'Living Together'
 Multiculturalism
 Leisure & recreation
 Sport
 Religious diversity
 Arts
 Aboriginal culture
 Links with Pacific neighbours
 Community based activities
 Womens activities
 Contribution of trade unions
 Film & television
 Education
 Aviation, tall ships
 Skill Olympics
 Science
 Historic sites, tracks & Manuscripts
 Youth
 The aged
 Participation of disabled
 Bicentennial flag & logo

THEMES IGNORED

'The Australian Achievement'
 Successful assimilation of migrants
 Work ethic
 High living standards
 Christian traditions
 The Anzacs
 British heritage
 British Commonwealth
 Alliance with America
 The family
 Private enterprise
 Federation
 The legal system & the rule of law
 The Monarchy
 Entrepreneurship
 A workable Constitution
 Freedom of speech & press
 Freedom of association
 Democracy
 Relative social harmony
 The Australian Flag