Who owns the National Identity?

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Claims that the ABC, the Australia Council or any other government agency has a special role in shaping the national identity should sound warning bells.

During the current debate regarding the future of the ABC an argument has emerged that the ABC has a special role expressing and preserving the Australian national identity. I first heard this view stated by Quentin Dempster on Radio National but it also turned up in an article written by Morag Fraser for the Sydney Morning Herald. If we are to recognize that the ABC has a 'special' role in relation to the national identity then we must also accept that what comes out of the ABC on this matter is equally 'special', and more worthy of our attention than what emanates from other sources. This strikes me as an extraordinarily dangerous doctrine, not least because of the particularly negative attitude to the national identity that one finds expressed in parts of the ABC. It does, however, raise a larger issue which is, if anyone, owns the Australian national identity, and if any particular group or institution should be given special status to express and represent it.

The doctrine of the 'special' role of the ABC would seem to be founded on the belief that the national identity is owned by the government or the state. As the government owns the national identity equally it is free both to define its nature and then to promulgate it through its various agencies. The role of the citizenry is passive; it should follow where the government leads and adjust its views as the state decrees. The ABC is special because it presents the country with each new updated version of the national identity: one day more multicultural, the next republican, the following day a new Asian emphasis.

The account above may sound a little extreme but there can be little doubt that the reign of the 'big picture man' was marked by a series of attempts to transform the Australian identity so that it accorded more with Keating's policies and 'vision'. Keating, himself, spoke proudly of the cultural shift that he believed was taking place in Australia, and he linked this shift to the policies that his government was pursuing, including multiculturalism, Mabo, the republic and the Industrial Relations Act. In Creative Nation, the statement of his government's cultural policy, a pointed contrast was made between the narrow culture of Australia's past and the dynamic multiculturalism culture of contemporary Australia. He believed that the place of government was to exercise leadership and to move the country even further down the road away from an older Australian identity to a newer, dynamic one that accorded with his view of Australia and its place in the world. Such a view of the Australian national identity is founded on what Walter Ullmann has termed the "descending theory of government". Ideas are formulated at the top and then imposed on the citizenry: it is the cultural equivalent of a command economy.

Privileged Status: There are a number of objections to this vision of the national identity. The first is that it accords a special place to a small group of people who are left in charge of deciding the nature of the national identity. In effect this means a small group of intellectuals who manage to capture the ear of the government and who seek to impose their vision of the national identity on the rest of us. It is interesting to recall in this regard that when the so-called 'Ideas Summit' was held in 1989 only those holding to a liberal and/or socialist-humanist
view of the world were invited to attend. In an act of the grossest philis-
tinism both churchmen and anyone tainted by association with neo-classi-
cal economics were excluded. The same type of intellectual — the left-
liberal humanist — is to be found in the ABC. True, the ABC does possess
a religious affairs department but it also is dominated by left liberals more
interested in social change than tradi-
tional religious concerns.

The desire by certain left-liberal
intellectuals to exercise hegemonic
control over both Australian cultural
life and the national identity must make
us extremely wary of any attempt by
the government or any of its agencies,
be it the ABC or the Australia Council,
to acquire a special role regarding the
national identity. One can see this most
clearly in the contribution that left-lib-
eral intellectuals have made to discus-
sions about the national identity during
the past 15 years. They have presented
the Australian past as a tale of the
oppression of women, migrants and
Aborigines. They have actively sought
to discredit older versions of the Aus-
tralian national identity as racist and
sexist, in effect to demonize it as a
blight on the landscape. It is not diffi-
cult to see why they would seek to
paint it in the blackest of colours. If the
established identity is so evil then the
case for discarding it and creating a
new one becomes a very powerful
one. A discredited past demands a new
start, and the left-liberal intelligentsia is
quite happy to provide materials that
the state can use to create that new
identity.

The strength of these left liberals
should not be underestimated. They most certainly had the ear of the 'big
picture man'. The papers given at the
Australian Historical Association's con-
fERENCE held recently in Melbourne
demonstrate the extent to which they
have captured the historical profession.

The real problem with according
special status to such groups in the cre-
ation of the national identity is that it
accords special status to what are essen-
tially interest groups. Left-liberal
intellectuals, whatever they may think,
speak only for themselves and not for
the Australian people as a whole. They
are just another interest group pleading
their case. As Bob Browning has
recently argued in his book Bad Gov-
ernment (Canburbury Press) they get
heard more often than other groups
because of the relationship that has
grown up between what he calls the
New Class, the government bureaucracy
and such agencies as the ABC and
the Australia Council. This does not
mean that their views on Australian
identity carry a special legitimacy. Rather it should be a warning to treat
complex and pluralist, composed of a
whole range of associations, individuals
and institutions, so we cannot expect
the Australian national identity to be
simple. It is instead multi-faceted be-
cause it is constantly being re-fash-
ioned in different forms by a variety of
groups and individuals. This is not to
say that there is no Australian national
identity. Rather it is to say that the
national identity is a complex entity
and that, in a pluralist civil society, it
will find a variety of expressions. One
can see this clearly in the history of the
Australian national identity as different
aspects of it have been expressed, from
the individualistic bushman to the
democratic egalitarian worker to the
gallant ANZAC.

For this very reason no institution
can be given a special place to
expound or express what it believes to
be the national identity. Its version
of the national identity will only ever be
partial and in need of being both cor-
corrected and complemented by the ver-
sions put forward by other individuals
and institutions. To a certain extent this
means that there always have been,
and always will be, competing versions
of the Australian national identity. In
this case the only final court of appeal
is what the Australian people feel com-
fortable with; as seen by what movies
and television programs they watch,
what books they read and the sorts of
activities they attend. In the past the
ABC, in line with the Keating vision of
leadership, has sought not so much to
follow the people as to lead them
towards the preferred ABC version of
the national identity. The advertisements
might say that it's your ABC but too
often it's been their national identity.

One could hope for a more demo-
cratic and responsive ABC, but that
would not solve the fundamental prob-
lem involved in giving any institution a
privileged position to define and
express the national identity. In a plu-
ralist society it makes far more sense to
encourage that pluralism, and to build
up a strong civil society that is able to
give confident expression to its sense
of the national identity. A vigorous
democratic society is the best safeguard
of our national identity, and we should
be working to preserve that democracy
rather than the privileges of particular
institutions.