

From the Kitchen

26 January 2011



I can't ignore that it is Australia Day. We received Chinese-made Australian flags in the letterbox from a local real estate agent and people are walking around with Australian-flag clothing and head gear. Cars are sporting flags, as are letterboxes and house rooves.

Two hundred and twenty-three years ago eleven ships landed at Sydney Cove and disgorged around 1300 to 1400 people onto what was for them a strange, even hostile, land. Most of them had not chosen to travel. What was almost immediately obvious was that these pale people were very different from the indigenous people and, of course, there were differences among the newcomers: differences in class, background, occupation, fortune, ambition and sense of social responsibility and morality. Since then, many millions of people have migrated to this country, from almost every other country. This has created a society of people with a diversity of ethnicities and speaking a diversity of languages.

One of the most debated questions, and one of the most vexed ones, is “what does it mean to be Australian?” It brings up prejudice and bigotry and sometimes violence. More than half the population was not born here or has at least one parent who wasn't born here. Yet, Australian-born people who look ‘foreign’ may be told by bigots to “go back where you came from”.

Most people don't know, or have forgotten, that Australian ‘citizenship’ did not exist before 1948. Before that time, people born in Australia were usually ‘British Subjects’. There is no mention of Australian citizenship in the constitution. While they were nominally citizens, many indigenous people did not enjoy the benefits of such a status¹. People's rights as citizens depended and continue to depend on the vagaries of State and Territory laws. Anyone born in this country before 1986 was considered Australian from birth and others may become Australian through naturalisation, or if born here to non-Australian parents, automatically after their tenth birthday².

Every now and then nationalism becomes a topic of discussion and argument and is debated in parliament and in the media. It often takes form in clichés such as ‘we need to protect our way of life’, ‘we will choose who we allow into this country’, ‘they take all our jobs and housing’, to the extreme of ‘we are no longer safe in our own streets’. We forget that we systematically and deliberately destroyed the way of life of the original inhabitants. Almost no-one who has come to this place in the last two hundred years to make a new life, came here with the intention of doing harm to those already here, although many of those who were forced to come here as convicts may have been anti-social or, at least, very angry.

Most immigrants and refugees have a dream of becoming Australian, becoming like those already here. Australianness is what attracts them, whatever that may be in their minds. Granted, when they arrive, they are likely to gravitate to others who are most like them – ethnically, spiritually or by dint of origin. This forms recognisable groupings on our society and a diversity of beliefs and interests that contribute to making this a dynamic place to live.

These are things that nationalists fail to understand or choose to ignore, as for many of them the arguments they espouse are no more than an excuse to vent their own antisocial

tendencies. If there were no ‘foreigners’ for them to rail against, they would find or create other divisions. As others have said: any excuse will do if you need an excuse.

What gets lost in all the debates and arguments between groups within Australia, and in Australia about our place in the world, is the distinction between ‘different’ and ‘better’. “I am X and proud of it” is often an expression of intolerance, not an invitation for discussion or a request for information about not-X. ‘Un-Australian’ is a term used pejoratively to describe almost any idea that does not accord with the user’s idea of what (a boring, homogenous) Australian society is or should be. It allows no room for diversity.

So, what is it to be Australian? It could be as simple as choosing to live here and to participate in society. It could be choosing to live here rather than somewhere else. It is curious, however, that there are many thousands of people, born in Australia, who live permanently outside Australia and have done so for most of their lives, but who still consider themselves Australian. There are also people who have migrated here and become naturalised Australians, yet still identify themselves with the place they left long ago.

Maybe I am Australian because I say I am.

1. *Indigenous People and Citizenship* by John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, a paper available from www.law.unimelb.edu.au/events/citizen/chesterman.pdf
2. See www.citizenship.gov.au/current/