

From the Kitchen

25 April 2012



Just as most humans have a personality and a sense of identity, so do most countries. Australia struggles to work out precisely what its identity is.

Many countries that exist today became countries through armed struggle, which has contributed to a sense of identity. Australia did not go through this process, though there was armed struggle on this continent involving the original inhabitants and the European invaders. Some present-day countries were colonised hundreds of years ago (usually for commercial or territorial purposes) and were later granted independence (with or without struggle). There are countries that gained independence and then split apart, usually, again, after armed struggle. Other countries are amalgams of former small kingdoms, dukedoms or other ~doms.

Australia quotes the invasion of the Gallipoli Peninsula on 25 April 1915 as one of its formative experiences, though Australia itself was never threatened territorially in the 1914-18 war. The ‘sacrifice’ of so many thousands of men is seen by many as nation-building. Australia *was* attacked (by the Japanese a number of times in the 1939-45 war), but this is rarely quoted as contributing to its sense of nationhood. It is curious that the 1915 event is considered so pivotal, as Australia’s involvement in the fighting was to a large degree as a staunch member of the British Empire and the fighting was to protect a way of life centred on England.

In 1915 and well into the 1960s, Australia considered itself a white Anglo-Saxon country. It barely tolerated the continental European immigrants, and the southern Europeans less than those paler ones from the north. Chinese in Australia found it particularly difficult, though many of them were sixth or seventh generation descendants of Chinese who came out during the gold rushes in the mid-1800s.

Australia has let go of the British apron strings, but is now holding those of the USA, though many Americans don’t even know where Australia is. (“Isn’t Austria somewhere in Europe near that Red Cross country?”) Australia used to see itself as an agricultural and manufacturing nation, but is now largely an exporter of minerals and fossil fuels.

So, what gives Australia its identity? For many Australians it is still an almost century-old disastrous military campaign. Generally it seems to be that military campaign and sport and Waltzing Matilda and, currently, a sense that it is in better economic shape than any other country.

Australians also see themselves as ‘punching above their weight’, in sport, science, medicine and innovation. This leads to a justified pride in achievement – Australia performs better than most countries, per capita. But there seems to be an absence of an overriding, compelling sense of what it means to be Australian.

Governments have talked of changing the citizenship test to include an understanding of such Australian qualities as mateship, as if this is particularly Australian. I sense that mateship is largely a myth from the past and that, where it does exist, it does not go very deep. Other qualities touted as being essentially Australian, though other countries would

probably claim them as essentially theirs, include egalitarianism, fairness, tolerance and respect for the rule of law. While these qualities may contribute to a sense of nationhood or identity of a nation, they cannot define a unique national identity.

While ANZAC Day is commemorated each year with passion, it is not the country's national day. Australia Day, curiously, celebrates the British invasion of the eastern part of the continent. It was the start of colonisation, not the start of a nation. Much debate, argument and soul searching went into forging a federation out of six colonies, leading to the 'birth' of Australia as an independent nation on 1 January (1901) and that date should arguable be the national day. Australians would resist such a notion, because New Year's Day is already a well-established public holiday and, falling in mid-summer, many Australians are on extended holidays. This does not seem to stop the citizens of the USA celebrating 4th July with fervour, though it occurs in the middle of *their* summer. Australia Day, on 26 January, marks the end of the summer holidays for many people and most school years start shortly after.

Holidays are an entrenched aspect of the Australian way of life. Most working people take a total of four weeks annual leave and there are another eight to ten public holidays (depending on the state or territory in which you live). We protest vigorously against any attempt to deprive us of any of these. Maybe the Australian capacity for leisure and leisure activities should be the defining quality of its nationhood.