

# Does australia need a national identity?

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Does Australia need a national identity? " Australia needs sudden shocks of reorientation within its society that will divorce it from the largely irrelevant problems of the British, make it possible to speed necessary changes and to develop some new sense of identity, some public feeling of being a people who can be described - even if incorrectly - as such-and-such a kind of nation, and act at times as if it were so. Australians are anonymous, featureless, nothing-men. This modest anonymity reveals itself in the argument that Australia does not run to the kind of person we could turn into a president." Donald Horne - 1964

For various reasons, a national identity has become a problematic subject for most western countries. One reason is that an influx of migrants has caused citizens to question the appropriateness of asserting a national character that migrants are not in conformity with. A second reason is that the internet has facilitated the flow of ideas so that likeminded subcultures based on music, religions, TV shows, cooking, and politics now operate in various countries around the world. These subcultures provide a more meaningful sense of belonging than that provided by vague concepts of a national character. Furthermore, many citizens realise they often share more in common with some people from different countries than they do with their own. For the west, the erosion of national identities has not come without cost. Specifically, a national identity influences the motivation of individuals to support the ambitions of their compatriots. For example, most sports-loving Australians have a strong desire to see their compatriots achieve. Consequently, they support their tax dollars being spent to fund training programs. Furthermore, they pay money to enter stadiums where they can cheer encouragement. If individuals lacked

affinity to other people from their country, then they would not have any desire to support anyone except themselves. Aside from decreasing the motivation to help each other, the lack of an identity potentially contributes to alienation and poor psychological health. According to John Ralston Saul, "Alienation at its most essential level is not poverty or unemployment. It is the inability to imagine your society and therefore to imagine yourself in it." If individuals can not conceive of a community identity, then they cannot conceive of a role to play in a community. The outcome may be depression or suicide. Admittedly, minority or subcultural identities provide a substitute for a national identity, but these identities are not always accessible to every individual. Ironically, one of the biggest problems of western countries lacking a national identity is that their social policy is usually written on the basis that an identity exists. Specifically, almost all social policy in the western world is written on the basis that there is a majority culture in which there are minorities to be accommodated. Although the writers of the policy may not define the values, racial makeup, traditions, and customs of the majority culture, the majority culture is still referred to and policy made on the basis that it is influential. Unfortunately, the policy documents become useless in areas of the country where a national identity is almost completely absent from the identity of the people of the region. For example, in many areas of Sydney and Melbourne, there are almost no individuals who identify as Australian. In these areas, a Korean kid may sit in a class surrounded by Vietnamese, Sudanese, Italian, Afghani or Lebanese kids. The Korean kid may be in fear that a gang of these kids will beat him up on the way home. The kid's only real hope of protection is to join a Korean gang. When the kid

is mixed race, or no gang is available, he or she is particularly vulnerable. Teachers are ill equipped to deal with the conflicts because their training is on how to protect minorities from the racist majority. As a result, they may get the kids to make posters denouncing Adolph Hitler in order to teach the kids that it is wrong for majorities to repress minorities. While it is a nice message, it fails to deal with the racial conflict that is most relevant to the kid's daily world. Like teachers, police are also ill equipped to deal with the conflict between minorities. A kid may be beaten to a bloodied pulp by a racial gang but if the kid's parents ask the police for help, the police are wary about any minority groups being over-represented in crime statistics, which would make it seem that the police are racist. As a result, they prefer to turn a blind eye or suggest a course of action that doesn't involve the police. Because social policy is ill-equipped to deal with conflict between minorities, many areas of the western world are almost like scenes out of Mad Max. Individuals join gangs for protection, there is little affinity between people, and there is an almost complete absence of social policy designed to deal with the conflicts. Governments of the western world are increasingly realising that their policies are not able to deal with the racial conflicts in their countries that do not involve the "majority" culture. Either the governments need to be more assertive in defining an identity or accept that no national identity exists in many areas of their country and write policy accordingly. The later option probably would never occur because it would necessitate that politicians give up some of their reverent power with voters and devalue the significance of their office.