

“What is Social Cohesion and how does it work in Australia”

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Who we are as Australians? What we share in common? How we do cohere together as we become a more diverse and pluralist society? What are those core values from our inherited past which might serve to unite us as Australians in shaping and reshaping our national identity? These kinds of questions usually draw us together as we search for a sense of shared meaning, purpose and direction in our lives together. Such matters are at once spiritual, cultural, political and social, and they can help to define by binding us together across our many and obvious differences as individual human beings.

We are inclined to talk a little glibly these days about ‘Aussie values’ as if everyone knew what they were and everyone agreed about them. Even that word ‘values’ is problematic to some, especially to those who are suspicious of all attempts to impose any kind of cultural or religious framework on what they regard as an open, secular society. Yet at the very least we can identify some important recurring themes, or national sentiments which are constantly reiterated in public without there being any serious disagreement.

Here are some which I can think we can take on board, noting that they will always need refining or restating as change occurs over time.

The first is a universal one. It is that all people everywhere share one planet and are inhabitants of one world. Canadian academic and writer Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase ‘the global village’ in the early 1960’s to describe the impact of the new media on a world shrinking into our living rooms. Since then, the process now called globalization has replaced it as a process describing the dynamic economic and social forces at work, generating rapid change, demanding constant adaptation to new circumstances and in return promising rich new opportunities. There is a downside, as it is inherently disruptive of older structures, cultures, frameworks of meaning and patterns of behaviour. It can be exciting for some who are well placed to respond, but deeply unsettling and excluding for those who by age, education, location, technological

access and economic circumstance are not well placed to respond. Such people are often left behind and marginalized in both a social and an economic sense. Yet because all people are seen to be part of one world, it is now recognized that there is emerging a shared sense of obligation on the part of nations and organizations including Australia, in helping to tackle global problems such as poverty, inequality, famine and natural disaster.

The second is national and for us relates to the Commonwealth of Australia. We are exceptionally fortunate in a geographic and political sense to be what Federation Father Sir Henry Parkes and later Sir Edmund Barton called for, 'A nation for a continent and a continent for a nation.' Since 1901 when the six colonies federated into one commonwealth on one landmass, we have shared a sense of place, without boundaries or land borders to divide us, like few other people in the world. In earlier times this meant being somewhat isolated and remote, due to 'the Tyranny of Distance', being at the fringes of power and influence associated with great population centres. With the revolution in transport and communications these barriers are being broken down, together with an earlier mindset of insularity which risks not being attuned to what is happening in the wider world, where many important trends happen elsewhere first before they reach us. The new challenge is to make sure our antennae are out and we are willing and prepared to work that much smarter and more creatively to make our way in the wider world. We share many things with our Trans Tasman neighbor New Zealand such as the popular, pugilistic phrase 'to punch above our weight.' Increasingly it is now being recognized that if we do not, there will be serious consequences for our prosperity and political influence such as a decline in our national living standards and the loss of jobs, especially among those who are most vulnerable. Ever since Federation in 1901 Australia was an early leader in establishing things like the national living 'basic' wage, a system of pensions and benefits, and later a hospital and health insurance which remain, with later additions and the future prospect of a national disability insurance scheme.

The third matter to note is an economic system which P.D. Jonson describes as 'democratic capitalism'. We inherited capitalism and democracy from Britain and have maintained them continuously because this is the most satisfactory [some might say 'least unsatisfactory'] means of generating and distributing wealth and opportunity. In any globalized economy the biggest challenge is always how best to manage cycles of boom and bust, of inflation and recession while shielding ourselves from periodic global disruptions and failures not necessarily of our making. As we all know, this is presently having an impact across the world because nations

generally and banks in particular have failed to manage their funds prudently, thereby causing the latest Global Financial Crisis.

The fourth factor is our long standing democratic political tradition. It is a matter of pride that we are in fact one of the five longest, continuing democracies in the modern world. These hard won freedoms are to be exercised responsibly by all citizens, taking care to ensure that our freedoms are prized, not abused and do not undermine the freedoms of others. All this requires that what is called 'representative and responsible government' is skillfully managed by taking due account of the different aspirations and expectations of people. This task tends to become more difficult to manage harmoniously the more diverse modern society becomes. When diversity and freedom are met together, balancing peoples' different expectations and accommodating their different cultural and religious values and practices becomes a challenge for governments and community organizations.

The fifth characteristic it must be said is 'a work in progress'. Across differences of religious tradition, political outlook, geographic location and ethnic background, as individuals we must also develop the capacity and will to live together in peace and harmony, by understanding and even embracing those differences; hence the key word 'cohesion'. This cannot be achieved through a centralized command economy, bureaucratic or political control or by social engineering. We are talking here of those deeper matters which take us to the wellsprings of life itself, to the ground of our being, to profound spiritual forces providing us with a shared sense of meaning and purpose and of how these matters can enable people to thrive and to enrich their lives. Even in secular political contexts it is slowly being acknowledged once again, that the religious factor in public and private life cannot be dismissed, or even politely ignored as many secular humanists might wish to be the case. We know from history and contemporary experience in other countries that if these wellsprings of hope, faith and human aspiration are ignored, cut off, denied or not taken seriously, and if minorities feel excluded, or discriminated against, there are potentially serious consequences which can easily erupt and even become aggressive as people find new means of attracting public attention to make known their feelings and make demands. In these matters, Australia has a lot of ground to cover before we can make claim to be a truly cohesive society across our differences.

The sixth matter is to do with justice or righteousness as derived from the great religious teaching traditions and later reformulated by the philosophers of secular democracies. This idea

of social justice is what is popularly called in Australia 'a fair go' for all, regardless of who they are or from whence they have come. Justice carries the clear implication that we must constantly address those particular areas of poverty, disability, illness, homelessness, remoteness, social exclusion and other human needs, which may not be the fault of the individual and which can even persist in times of seeming economic abundance. Today we mostly recognize that some people, from time to time will need the support of the government and voluntary societies on the basis of 'social obligation'.

The seventh matter encourages the civic virtue of tolerance and goes beyond it. This is to recognize that behind many differences in cultural traditions and faith practices there are common values which are to be acknowledged and celebrated respectfully as being done in similar spirit. Many people from different faith traditions believe we must go beyond mere tolerance, recognizing that we should honour and respect individual human differences in relation to such matters as religion, culture and social practice especially where they are conducive to overall wholeness, health and harmony. As I indicated earlier, there are risks of unintended consequences when governments take a further step by trying to enforce tolerance on a society, for example by passing Religious Vilification Laws as in Victoria. This is a subject for further cool headed public discussions.

Instead, Section 116 of the Australian Constitution clearly affirms freedom of religion when it declares 'The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or prohibiting the free exercise of religion, and no religious test shall be required as to a qualification for any office or public trust under the commonwealth'. In the few High Court interpretations occurring since 1901, I see no evidence of a strict separationist doctrine being applied to any of its decisions. Here in Australia 'freedom of religion' does not imply freedom from religion or even the separation of church and state as in the United States.

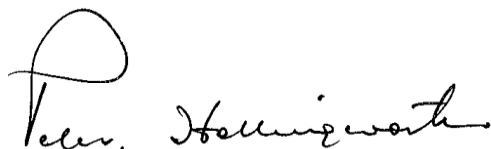
Finally another historic factor shaping Australia's national identity which cannot be ignored; we are a 'settler society' where most of the population are the descendents of migrant settlers who have come from elsewhere to make a new life over the past two centuries. As is the case throughout human history, settlement often implies displacement and all its ramifications. I refer to the aboriginal peoples who came here much earlier in pre historic times. They developed a pre agrarian hunter-gatherer tribal form of society, forming a very different relationship to the land on which they lived and moved and which they continue to regard as

sacred to them and their ancestors. I believe they ought to have a special place of recognition and honour in the constitutional preamble, and be given appropriate support as they recover from privation, working out their own unique place in the changing world of post European settlement from which many were tragically displaced.

There are other points that could be added such as 'the legend of the bush' which is a subject in its own right. Meanwhile these themes form the basis of our values, goals, objectives, plans, strategies and actions appropriate to a nation striving to engage together in shaping a future which will certainly be a global one as well.

I feel bound to raise a further question being asked by those who have been here for several generations. 'What is the nature of our Anglo European Western heritage? Should we dismiss our past, let it go or should we seek to celebrate its better qualities?' This carries a further question 'what is there in our history and tradition that we would want to preserve, and leave for posterity, one of the most obvious of these being the rule of law. What are those abiding beliefs that led our forebears to take the decisions and actions that they did in coming here to make a new life for themselves and their families? How should we seek to be faithful to those foundational beliefs and values in our time, so that a living, unbroken tradition might be maintained, and given a fresh dynamic, especially in light of the fact that these are also times of volatility, discontinuity and rapid change? This implies that the two forces have to be held in tension, the forces of continuity and change. Only in this way can the wisdom of experience inform the present, enabling the present to speak to and inform the future. Thus they belong together, for as the past has shaped the present so the present should re shape a future which will come from them both. 'Would you agree with me or not'?

I can't promise to answer all the questions you might pose, but together we must search for answers that will help us build a more cohesive society here in Australia as an inheritance for future generations.



Peter Hollingworth