Shaping the Australian identity

David d'Lima, FamilyVoice Australia - November 2020

The identity of the Australian people is the set of qualities that characterise those who live on our great island continental landmass. Those characteristics include the predominantly English heritage of the people, including the language, religion, customs, civic institutions, food and clothing exported by England in the colonial era. The First Fleet arrived in 1788, bringing convicts and colonists who carried the English language, the Christian faith, the Crown, with the law code and customs of Britain.

Indigenous culture flourished prior to the arrival of British people, but Aboriginal influences on colonial and modern Australian mainstream identity are minimal. The greatest indigenous influence on Australian culture is perhaps the use of the didgeridoo by some musicians, and the use of certain indigenous nouns including *kangaroo, koala, boomerang, Uluru*, *and Kata Tjuta*.

The needs and aspirations of the Indigenous people gripped the Australian people in 1967, who voted overwhelmingly in a constitutional referendum to transfer Indigenous affairs from State to Federal jurisdiction. In the year 2000, a movement called Crossing Bridges for Reconciliation stirred many Australians towards concern for the Aboriginal people and in 2007 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to the 'Stolen Generation'. Those factors have influenced Australian culture, but the main cultural markers of language, religion, customs, civic institutions, food and clothing, are from Britain:

- The **language** of Australia is overwhelming English. Brought from England and Ireland, the language has morphed slightly in its pronunciation and vocabulary. Australian visitors to other English-speaking countries are readily identified as Australian by their accent. American influences such as the pronunciation of certain words, eg the last letter of the alphabet (as zee instead of zed) and use of the word 'done' instead of 'finished' have occurred through highly US-focussed media.

- The **religion** of Australia is mainly Christian. According to the 2016 census, 52% of people identify as Christian. While that percentage has fallen markedly, the nation retains a strong Christian foundation that hugely impacts the Australian identity, though it is not widely recognised or noticed. That foundation persists irrespective of the personal faith of individuals. It persists in the Christian crosses on the Australian Flag, the daily opening of parliamentary sessions with Christian prayer, daily biblical quotations in newspapers, and the option (taken by most citizenship candidates) to make their citizenship pledge as an oath: 'under God'.

- Many **customs** of Australia are English, and include driving on the left hand side of the road, playing such games as soccer, cricket and rugby, and enjoying a public holiday on Boxing Day.

- Australia's **civic institutions** are derived from England and include the Westminster system, democracy, bicameral parliamentary systems, responsible government, the presumption of innocence, trial by jury, and a politically neutral Crown. We honour Britain as colonial patron by placing the Union Jack in the esteemed position in our flag, thereby giving a civic application to the Fifth Commandment: *Honour your mother and father* (Exodus 20:12 and Ephesians 6:2).

- The **food** enjoyed in Australia is largely English, and includes roast dinners, fish and chips, pies and pasties, sandwiches, etc, supplemented by newly experienced cuisine such as American, Italian, Indian, Chinese and Japanese foods. Vegemite, however, is distinctively Australian.

- The ordinary **clothing** worn by Australians is mainly English, consisting of shirts, trousers and dresses; the formal attire of suits and gowns is also from England.

Additional notes about the distinctively Australian culture include the following:

- Australian soldiers are well-reputed for their bravery and capacity for independent operation;
- Australians are recognised for our friendliness and willingness to lend a hand;
- Australian identity distinctive events include Australia Day and the Queen's Birthday Public Holiday (the first and oldest public holiday in our national civic tradition);
- The Sydney Opera House is Australia's iconic building, and is the most recognised building in the world. Hence our connection to the opera house provides an Australian cultural distinctive;
- Australian Rules Football (known as 'Aussie Rules') is a sport invented in Australia and played here with tremendous interest.

Australia has a huge connection to Britain and other countries within what was previously known as the British Empire, through shared wartime experiences. The participation by Australia in the First World War (1914-1918) was formative to the Australian identity, as noted by the poet Banjo Paterson:

> *The mettle that a race can show*
> *Is proved with shot and steel,*
> *And now we know what nations know*
> *And feel what nations feel.*

A massive proportion of Australians volunteered to serve in the Great War, and about 60,000 perished. Almost every family in Australia was powerfully shaped by the First World War. Hence, the widespread respect for the Anzac tradition, that persists through the generations and is showcased on Anzac Day each year, especially at the traditional Anzac Day Australian Football League match, where crowds of about 90,000 people honour the Anzacs and over one million watch by television.

The Anzac tradition also influenced people who watched the nightly close of transmission on Channel Nine during the 1970s as it featured the following patriotic lyrics, sung to the tune of *Waltzing Matilda*:

> **God Bless Australia** - attributed to Jack O'Hagan
>
> *Here in this God-given land of ours, Australia*
> *This proud possession, our own piece of earth*
> *That was built by our fathers who pioneered our heritage*
> *Here in Australia, the land of our birth*
>
> *God bless Australia, our land Australia*
> *Home of the Anzac, the strong and the free*
> *It's our homeland, our own land,*
> *to cherish for eternity*
> *God bless Australia, the land of the free*
>
> *Here in Australia we treasure love and liberty*
> *Our way of life, all for one, one for all*
> *We're a peace loving race, but should danger ever threaten us*
> *Let the world know, we will answer the call*.

The rich Christian heritage that is foundational to the Australian culture provides superb opportunities to share the good news of Jesus Christ, to shape each individual and wider society.