



## Centenary of Federation

What is an Australian? Is there a national character which sets Australians apart from other nations? This year, the Centenary of Federation, will give us many opportunities to consider what characteristics might be distinctly Australian.

Environmetrics identifies 10 characteristics which are typically Australian. We discuss them here with particular reference to leisure choices.

### Commemoration of national identity

National culture, or identity, is shaped in significant ways by the way we use our leisure time because, unlike work and family duties where we do what we must, we can choose what to do in our leisure time. Whether we choose to watch television, play sport, sing in a choir, serve Meals on Wheels, read a book or travel, we are engaging in cultural activities which help to define the national identity. Traditionally, Australia has been seen as a sporting culture, because many Australians have used their free time to practice their athletic skills or cheer their sporting heroes. Can we take a fresh look, now, at Australian leisure pursuits and consider what is the nature of the Australian character at the Centenary of Federation?

2001, the Centenary of Federation, will be the year of Australian identity. This is the topic which will keep appearing throughout the year, prompted by a significant series of government funded publications, programs and exhibitions.

The Federal Government's \$1 billion Federation Fund is supporting more than 1100 projects ranging from big ticket projects such as the National Museum of Australia, due to open in Canberra in March 2001, through to local projects such as playgrounds and picnic areas or an outdoor exhibition space for historical machinery in Manjimup, WA.

We can expect our leisure time this year to be occupied to some degree with this celebration of nationhood. While some events will be formal ceremonies or fun-filled parties, the largest portion of the \$1 billion will underpin national culture and identity through heritage, the arts, education and community projects.

Before the debates about identity commence in earnest, we offer our view of Australian identity, based on 12 years of social research into Australian leisure patterns and cultural participation. National identity evolves year by year, here we offer an up-to-the-minute picture. While we confirm some cherished views, others are re-worked and new components are introduced.

Recent events like the Sydney Olympics have made a significant impact on how we see ourselves, perhaps we will be able to look back at the end of 2001 and identify the contribution made by the \$1 billion Federation Fund to our view of who we are.



### **Ambitious and competitive**

So you thought Australians were easy-going party lovers who would rather laze at the beach than do a good day's work? On the contrary, ambition and competitiveness are strong strands in the Australian character. Australians seem ready to turn anything into a fiercely contested competition. You would expect the nation that invented Two-Up to embrace Iron Man competitions and Beach Volleyball, even though it is better known for relaxing at the beach than competing there. In fact, a vast amount of Australian leisure time is taken up with competitive activities where ambition has full reign.

It is in sport and in business that our ambition and competitiveness are most evident. Australians firmly believe in the virtue of reward based on merit. This value permeates education systems, workplaces and the overall economic structure of the country.

Australians love to come first, especially if the field is an international one.

### **Direct, forthright and honest**

To call a spade a spade is a very typical characteristic of Australians. A swimming pool is a swimming pool whereas a leisure centre is a different thing altogether. By and large, many Australians are cautious of styles of communication which sensationalise, exaggerate, talk around the subject, or leave fuzzy areas.

It could be said that Australians are comfortable with a level of directness that other nations may perceive as overly blunt.

Leisure venues, whether public or privately-run, must either deliver on the hyperbole of their advertising claims or match their promotions to the experience they offer.

### **Practical functionality**

Hands-on tinkering is a typically Australian way of getting things done. Australians place a high value on functionality and, until recently, have often been prepared to sacrifice style to function.

Australians delight in things that work well, as was evident during the Sydney Olympics when a large share of local reporting about the event was concerned with how well the transport system worked or how the airport was handling the heavy traffic levels.

This characteristic makes Australians excellent organisers and planners. They care that things should work well and are prepared to do the planning that ensures a good outcome.



Leisure venues that take care of cleanliness, service and wayfinding will be well ahead of competitors that don't.

#### **Youthful, energetic and enquiring**

Widely identified as a 'young' country, Australians of all ages show a readiness to embrace innovation not found in those societies which are more closely bound by traditional codes and expectations.

This quality brings a flexibility to the Australian character. Australians are seen to be buoyant and lively with an eagerness to explore and adopt new ideas and innovations.

Linked with this youthful quality is a sense of adventure and somewhat wide-eyed enthusiasm, which can seem a little naive or unsophisticated in some respects. There is a kind of innocence about this characteristic.

Our speedy adoption of new technologies is a well-known feature of Australian life. Our love of party-celebrations is becoming widely acknowledged — put on the map, perhaps, by Hawke's declaration of a national holiday on the winning of the Americas Cup in 1984, continued in the extravagant firework displays for New Years Eve in Sydney and the rapid growth of the Mardi Gras, and culminating most recently in the great mosh-pit party of the Olympic Closing Ceremony.

#### **Creative and intelligent**

This is an emerging aspect of the Australian character which is still gaining recognition. While Australians have been ready to see themselves as athletic, they have been slow to recognise that Australians are regarded as world class in their contribution to intellectual and artistic cultural life.

In fields as diverse as philosophy, medicine, law, journalism, biology, ballet, opera, classical music and the visual arts, Australians are achieving international acclaim.

This view of Australian identity runs counter to stereotypes which see Australians as typically anti-intellectual or as 'salt of the earth rough diamonds'. We believe that Australians are increasingly seeing themselves as a creative and intelligent nation.

Will the view of ourselves, provided by the stunning success of the Sydney Olympics, as creative and competent help to counter the old view of Australians as little more than sun worshipping sons of the soil? It is likely that the artistic excellence of the Olympics Opening Ceremony has helped to foster the perception of Australians as creative and intelligent.



### **Confident and outgoing**

Australians tend to see the national character as confident and out-going rather than shyly retiring. To some extent, this confidence is a recent element in the Australian identity. It has emerged in the past 10-15 years as Australia has thrown off a subservience to British culture and rejected the previously common stance of 'cultural cringe'.

There is, however, a modesty to this confidence that contrasts with the self-promoting and inflated assertions often identified as an American characteristic. Australians are seen as confident in their abilities but not self-aggrandising or brash. It is a strong strand of Australian life that public personas who are seen to be inflated are cut down to size. It is possible that the Tall Poppy Syndrome, which is regarded as so typical of Australia, may be one way that Australians reject a style of confidence that does not fit ideals about the national character.

Humility is blended with confidence-in-ability in the Australian character. Many of the most loved Australian personalities have this blend of traits. Sir Donald Bradman, for example, is lauded by media and public alike, partly for his very real talents and achievements, but also for his modesty about those achievements. He is not seen to seek public attention for his own sake, instead he demonstrates a quiet humility along with friendly willingness to treat others as equals. Cathy Freeman appears to have similar appeal.

In contrast with the main-stream view of the Australian character, is the recognition that indigenous Australians, in general, are characterised as shy rather than out-going. However, the past two decades have seen an increasingly out-going presence in Australian cultural life as this reticence has given way to more confident assertions of self-worth and rights

### **Friendly, relaxed and good-natured**

This aspect of the Australian identity is widely recognised by Australians, and, increasingly, by the rest of the world.

In 1997, the world's largest travel magazine, *Conde Nast Traveller*, declared the Australian people the friendliest in the world with an award inscribed: "The most good-natured, generous hosts on the planet."

To Australians, true friendship is a defining value — a value which has been expressed powerfully through the notion of mateship. This very Australian notion has two aspects.



One is the idea of being there in times of need to care for family, friends and community. This aspect is reflected private lives as well as in the highly developed volunteer organisations embedded in Australian culture. Surf life-saving and fire fighting organisations are manifestations of this willingness to offer practical help in times of need to the extent of risking life and limb if necessary. The 'Clean Up' movement, initiated by Ian Kiernan, is a more recent manifestation of this cooperative helpfulness which was the foundation for the successful Olympic volunteer scheme.

A second aspect of mateship is the sheer fun and good-humour to be found in sociable companionship. Australians take a certain pride in their ability to have a good time in the company of friends. These sociable occasions are generally relaxed and casual rather than more formal.

Australians show high valuation for a relaxed and easy-going approach to life. They generally refuse to get hot under the collar over relatively small matters and denigrate those who do. The dry, laconic understatement of the stereotype 'bushie' is a common representation of this aspect of the Australian character.

The Australian tradition of the 'sickie' and the love of sun, surf and sand are different aspects of this characteristic along with rural based 'Nimbin' sub-cultures and the current flourishing of urban 'cafe culture'. They contrast with the hard-working character of those driven by ambition or those who are 'doing it tough' on the land.

#### **Larrikin, can laugh at themselves**

A strong strand in the Australian character is the mischievous element of the larrikin. This prankster expresses youthful energy through simplistic trickery, undermining figures of authority and laughing at himself/herself. Australians are careful not to take themselves too seriously and steer well clear of any hint of pomposity. Dawn Fraser is an example of a popular Australian personality who is respected for her talents and achievements but loved for her rule-breaking larrikinism.

Australian humour is often self-referent and the sense of irony is well-developed. For Australians, humour is a common way of dealing with difficult circumstances. It also has a strand of the quirky, unexpected or eccentric to it. Films such as 'Strictly Ballroom', 'Priscilla', 'Kiss and Kill', 'Doing Time with Patsy Cline' and 'The Castle' embody these attributes very clearly.

#### **Fair go mentality**

While most Australians reject the language of moral correctness, we recognise a strong strand of morality in the Australian character. It is represented most clearly in public



discourse in terms of 'a fair go'. Australians are attuned to a cultural sense of right and wrong which can sometimes be quite different from the morality that is supported by rule and law. When the popular notion of fairness is contravened, there will be an outcry. A clear example of this comes from the world of cricket in the moral outrage that followed Ian Chappel's instruction to his brother to bowl underarm. While this action was permissible in the rules, it was felt by most Australians to be a blatant and shameful travesty of the rules of 'fair play'.

Australians see themselves as somewhat disrespectful of authority, law and rule, however, they do have a strong respect for moral qualities. Many Australians find it hard to talk about their appreciation of goodness, but their valuation becomes quite evident when exemplars of goodness die or are threatened.

For example, the strength of public response to the sudden death of Andrew Olle was not widely anticipated. It was clear that many people felt very keenly the loss of a voice which consistently exemplified fairness and tolerance. Fred Hollows and Charles Perkins are other Australians who have been widely appreciated for the way their lives were guided by conscience.

Just because Australians are often reticent in expressing directly their appreciation of moral values, does not mean that these values are absent from the Australian character. Similarly, the rejection of institutionalised expressions of morality (e.g. churches) does not mean that Australians have weak moral values.

#### **Egalitarian and pluralist**

Compared with many old cultures, relatively flat class structure and social fluidity are apparent in Australian society and are widely supported in the community. Australians applaud their freedom from the encumbrances of rigid class systems.

Egalitarianism in Australia is reflected in an acceptance of difference and a wish to encourage greater tolerance of diversity and pluralism, evident in the success of multi-cultural policies in Australia.

It is this streak in the Australian character that is reflected in the recent advertising line 'Australians sit in the front seat of taxis'. This tendency towards levelling of differences is also reflected in Australian's ready sympathy for the underdog and the tendency to cut prominent figures down to size, the Tall Poppy Syndrome.

The flurry of popularity for the policies of Pauline Hanson was evidence that not all Australians are strongly pluralist or supportive of diversity, however, it appears from the recent groundswell of popular support for the Reconciliation Movement that these values have wide support.



Current social trends which see a growing gap between high income earners and low income earners may, over time, erode this traditional element of Australian identity.

Many popular leisure pursuits are great social levellers—the beach is free for all to access and there are no private boxes for the privileged few.

These ten qualities are constantly adjusting with the shifting social climate. Some of them are supported by government policy or media interest, while others appear to rise and fall with their own momentum. They are part of the real world in which cities are built, investments are made and policy crafted. To ignore them or run counter to them, is to invite failure.



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