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Multiculturalism, Migration and Madness: Can Australia Survive?

A Book Review by Evonne Moore and Joseph Wayne Smith

REINVENTING AUSTRALIA
By Hugh MacKay
Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1993
325 pages, Aus.$ 16.95

Australia's cultural identity is up for grabs. While the Republicans urge an advance into their Brave New World, many of us remain torn between abandoning our cultural heritage and opting for change. Multiculturalism too is redefining our identity. Many Australians are worried about the long-term consequences of multiculturalism and the changing racial composition of our population. They resent not being allowed to participate in the debate on immigration. These are some of the intriguing findings of social researcher Hugh MacKay. His latest book, based on research carried out since 1979, provides valuable insights into the attitudes of ordinary Australians to the profound social changes which this country has undergone in the past twenty years.

MacKay argues that the closing decades of the twentieth century have been a period of social, cultural, political and economic upheaval entailing a radical redefinition of the "the Australian way of life" (p.6). As a result, many Australians are experiencing stress and insecurity. MacKay believes that the evidence for what he calls the "last straw syndrome" (p.13) are rising levels of domestic violence, serious assault, child abuse, and drug abuse. The stress of being "swept along on the tide of relentless change" (p.18) has created a confused sense of identity, lack of sense of purpose and "a growing feeling of isolation and alienation among Australians, especially young Australians" (p.19). As a culture, MacKay argues, we have lost our way.

MacKay contends that the new concept of multiculturalism is an uncomfortable one for many Australians. By contrast, the immediate post war migrant wave was based on the philosophy of assimilation. Migrants were expected to blend into the Australian community as quickly as possible. While this was not always easy or even possible for some migrants, the idea of assimilation reassured Australians that large-scale immigration posed no threat to the Australian way of life. Under the philosophy of multiculturalism, however, migrants are encouraged to view their ethnicity and their cultural differences from the Australian community as the basis of their strength and identity:

> *Now that `assimilation' has become a dirty word, such a [policy] shift raises deep questions about the Australian identity because it calls on Australians to re-define their long-standing concept of what an Australian is and their long-cherished stereotypes, myths and legends about the Australian character, the Australian style and the Australian ethos.*

MacKay argues that one reason why Australians remain unenthusiastic about multiculturalism is rising Asian immigration:

> *Australians' resistance to Asian migration is easy to understand, given their well-established pattern of attitudes towards migration. Asians are seen as being so physically different from Europeans as to make their assimilation difficult; their cultural heritage is assumed to be quite unlike that of traditional Australian racial groups … their attitude towards Australians is felt to be aloof and ungiving … When confronted with an ethnic and cultural group which is regarded as being so obviously different from the Australian mainstream, Australians begin to wonder whether their multiculturalism can extend this far. They revive the fear that Australia may become a number of separate cultures within one society, to an extent which will inevitably lead to tensions and conflicts (pp.160-161).*

He points out that many Australians fear that multiculturalism may encourage the perpetuation of ancient ethnic hostilities. Conflict between Serbs and Croats in Australia, for example, angers Australians who believe that migrant groups should be prepared to forgo their differences in the interests of main-taining harmony and unity in their adopted country.

What does it mean to be an Australian? MacKay argues that:

> *Australians want to believe that being an Australian should imply something more than simply living here: the notion of shared culture seems fundamental to any concept of identifiable society (p.162).*

He believes that the supporters and opponents of multiculturalism have to recognize that the point at issue is the degree of "commitment to the ideal of Australian nationhood" (p.164).

In addition to their questioning of multicul-turalism, MacKay finds that many Australians sup-port more debate on immigration. To some extent the economic recession has made this possible. But there is still a social taboo about debating aspects of Australia's immigration program. MacKay points out that:

> *Australians recognize that it is very easy to be branded `racist' when debating the subject of migration and multiculturalism, and they note with some horror the hostility which was directed at such public figures as Geoffrey Blainey and John Howard when they attemp-ted to open up the migration debate in the late 1980s (p.163).*

MacKay finds that Australians believe that the economic recession raises questions about Australia's migrant intake and they would like to see a more open cultural debate on immigration as well as an economic one.

MacKay's book analyzes recent social changes which "have raised big questions about our sense of personal identity and our sense of being a community" (p.22). In addition to multiculturalism and immigration, these include the redefinition of gender roles in the wake of the women's movement, easier divorce, rising unemployment and growing economic inequality. We are only starting to grasp how profound these changes have been. On the economic front alone, MacKay draws attention to the alarming statistic that between 1970 and 1990, one quarter of full-time male jobs disappeared — "an attrition without precedent since the depression of the Thirties" (p.144).

One of the best qualities of this book is MacKay's ability to draw out subtle connections between the factors forcing change and their social effects. He points out that while many of the social changes of the past two decades have been desirable in themselves, their outcomes may not always have been as beneficial as we would have expected. For example, the large-scale entry of married women into the paid workforce, an apparently desirable development in terms of many women's self-fulfillment and equality with men, has increased inequality across households.

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MacKay believes that growing inequality will produce more urban violence and street gangs as well as further neighborhood segregation of the affluent. We are, he suggests, approaching a "crossroads on the question of social class" (p.149). Whether we follow the United States or choose a more egalitarian road remains to be seen.

The significant redefinitions of Australian society over the past twenty years have involved money, class, cultural identity, gender roles, family life and work. MacKay's book examines all of these. He finds that the new philosophy of environmen-talism too has been part of the radical shift in ideas and attitudes of many Australians. Swept along on the furious winds of change for twenty years, many Australians are now asking for a re-evaluation of what sort of a society we want to live in. MacKay argues that the call to reconsider our migration policy is, for example, just one sign of a widespread desire to slow down the pace of change and to take stock. He suggests that Australia is passing through a troubled adolescent phase, but is encouraged by signs that more and more people are starting to appreciate that we cannot have it all, that hard decisions need to be taken.

In the last section of his book, MacKay examines the strategies Australians are adopting to help them cope with change. He suggests that the decline of hitherto stable institutions such as full employment and the family has encouraged the return of a "quest for personal values" (p.237). He views the rise of various forms of fundamentalism as a response to people's search for new values to replace the loss of older ones. Environmental and feminist fundamentalists have filled some of the spiritual vacuum. MacKay points out that it is only a small step from fundamentalism to a form of puritanism which demands regulations to control behavior. There is an increasing trend in Australia to regulate behavior in the fields of health, sexual relationships and religious and racial tolerance.

In their search for solutions, many people are seeking to recreate a sense of community. MacKay suggests that the Me-Generation philosophy of the 1960s and 1970s, which stressed individual freedom at the expense of relationships, has been replaced with a recognition of the importance of social bonds in groups and networks. While this is a positive trend, MacKay believes there is some danger that group conflict will increase. The growth of diverse ethnic sub-groups together with the increasing gap between rich and poor have "the potential to add a new dimension to tribal identity and tribal conflict." (p.289). While MacKay does not mention it, the demographic fragmentation of California, brought to a head in well-publicized ethnic riots and courtroom battles, serves as a warning that Australia should try to avoid the path taken by the United States. It is not too late to change our course. ■