

Australia's Cultural Identity

Lessons about multiculturalism from Canada

by Robert Birrell

Opinions vary as to whether most Australians share a core cultural identity, or if they do whether it is something to celebrate. Some critics would like to see the very notion of a collective cultural identity banished. Others believe Australia's social diversity is now such that it is fanciful to imagine a shared cultural identity. A growing minority like the idea, but argue that it will have to be based on the ideal of diversity itself.

I will return to these issues later. First, there are some strictly empirical issues to examine. The most important is whether any distinctive national culture can survive in an economically diminutive country like Australia which is on the receiving end of the multi-national TV, film, magazine and newspaper networks.

Globalization of the Media and Identity in Canada

Some opening comments on the situation in Canada will set the scene. If the Canadian experience is any guide then it would seem that our fate is to be subsumed into a global (probably North American) oriented culture. Currently, the great bulk of the product screened to Canadian TV viewers and film buffs is of U.S. origin. It is estimated that barely two percent of the TV drama watched by English-Canadian viewers is Canadian in content (Collins, 1990, 239) and that only 3 to 5 percent of the theatrical screen time is devoted to Canadian films (Goldman and Winter, 1991, 149). In any case the limited TV drama product and films produced in Canada are often intended for the North American market and thus not readily differentiated from U.S. output. In one devastating study of a sample of Canadian residents living near the U.S. border, 78

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percent were unable to name the author of the last Canadian book they had read and 56 percent could not name their favorite Canadian TV program or did not have one (Goldman and Winter, 1991, 153). It has reached the point where some observers find it difficult even to conceive of Canadians "being able to produce Canadian dramas that mass Canadian audiences will watch" (Collins, 1990, 334). This is partly because Canadian TV broadcasters can buy American drama product at a tenth or less of cost for Canadian material and partly because it is thought that Canadians actually prefer the American product.

The Importance of Cable TV

This dominance of U.S. TV product in Canada has occurred despite a history of Canadian government efforts to prevent it. The federal government has sought to maintain control over the TV and radio broadcasting media, precisely in order to maintain an independent Canadian cultural identity. To this end it has legislated to maintain Canadian ownership of the broadcasting system, and has required a degree of Canadian content on the free-to-air TV networks (around 50 percent in the evening hours, including some drama). However this has been circumvented somewhat on the commercial networks by the practice of sandwiching "Canadian" content around prime time U.S. material. As to drama, an indication of the limits of this legislation is that in 1985-86 the leading Canadian private network, CTV, was showing an average of just 1.5 hours of Canadian drama per week (Collins, 1990, 77).

In addition, the local content requirements have in effect been by-passed on the cable networks. By the early 1980s about 60 percent of Canadian TV households were cable subscribers. The penetration of homes by the cable networks was a remarkable 75 percent (Hollins, 1984, 95). The cable TV operators have to be Canadian-owned, and are required to provide priority access to Canadian networks. But the commercial viability of the cable operators has depended on their provision of U.S. material, usually including the major

networks (Collins, 1990, 46). Canadians have chosen, in the main, to watch American rather than Canadian material. The Canadian government and its regulatory bureaucracy have simply not been prepared to prevent this development (for example: by taxing U.S. material or by insisting that every channel meets the local content rules applied to free-to-air broadcasters).

Media Influences on Identity

One cannot jump from this information to claims that as a consequence of this cultural swamping Canadians have lost any sense of their own identity. Collins argues against this thesis (Collins, 1990) as does S.M. Lipset in his widely quoted analysis of the relationship between the U.S.A. and Canada (Lipset, 1990). However, there is evidence to suggest that the domination of U.S. origin material (especially in the TV drama and film areas) has influenced Canadians' conceptions of themselves. This seems particularly the case among ordinary people. They tend to be more dependent on TV for their information than are elites, who still make substantial use of newspapers as information sources (newspapers being one area where Canadian sources still prevail).

Public immersion in U.S.-oriented TV and film appears to have contributed to many Canadians' lamentable knowledge about their own public affairs and heritage. Ordinary members of the Canadian public have more difficulty identifying Canadian public figures, present or past than they do American. When Canadians think about public issues they tend to think in U.S. terms — including that they have the same race and crime problems as manifested in U.S. cities. Canadian children think that American legal practices like protections guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment and the existence of district attorneys characterize the Canadian scene too (Starowicz, 1993, 91). More seriously, it is argued that the relative paucity of Canadian public affairs programs shown on TV and the competition from U.S. news and public affairs shows means that Canada "does not have the basic tools to conduct even routine national debate on its airwaves" (Starowicz, 1993, 95).

These developments have probably contributed to the striking English-Canadian uncertainty about what it means to be Canadian. Thus the wide currency of jokes like the following: "Imagine a Committee on un-Canadian Activities. You can't.

Un-Canadianism is almost the very definition of Canadianism" (Stark, 1992, 135). This generalization does not, of course, apply to French-Canadians. In Quebec, the intelligentsia have led the effort to promote French-Canadian cultural distinctiveness. Quebec elites are contemptuous of their English-Canadian counterparts' lack of resoluteness in pressing for a parallel English-Canadian identity.

It is true that many English-Canadian intellectuals are hostile to American cultural imperialism and thus concerned to maintain Canadian economic and cultural independence. But most have difficulty articulating any notion of a common Canadian identity which might serve as a rallying point for their cause. This is partly because their commitment to multiculturalism means they are reluctant even to assert such an identity. For this reason many fall back on the current diversity of Canadians' national origins and cultures — Canada's cultural mosaic, to use the Canadian term — and claim this is what is distinctive of Canada.

Assuming this commentary is current, does it really matter? Some sections of the Australian intelligentsia, including many of the growing band of cultural analysts, think it does not. However, in Canada the stakes are high. Quebec nationalists are pursuing greater independence for their province, perhaps to the point of secession. So too are the indigenous people, the so-called First Nations. In addition, some of the provinces, particularly those in western Canada, have sought to go their own way, at least on economic policy matters. In this context, pan-Canadian nationalists have found it hard going to put an appealing case against what many feel is another major threat to Canada's sovereignty — the pressure for closer economic union with America. For this purpose they need to be able to articulate some compelling basis for Canadian unity. But currently Canadians lack any widely shared mission like the 19th century goal of integrating Canada's economy along the Canadian-Pacific railway spine (McDougall, 1991, 397). As the upsurge in the appeal of the populist (and anti-pluralist) western-based Reform Party in the early 1990s suggests, multiculturalism is not a compelling ideal even among Anglo-Canadians, let alone French-Canadian or aboriginal Canadians.

So it is no surprise that those favoring closer North American integration (including most

business interests) prevailed in the recent debates over free trade on the North American continent. Their success led in the implementation of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) in January 1989 and to Canada's participation in the recently signed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the U.S., Mexico and Canada. As a result, some aspects of Canadian society, which Canadian nationalists like to think differentiates Canada from the U.S.A., are now under threat. These include Canada's relatively generous social welfare system (compared to the U.S.) and its more tightly regulated labor market and more interventionist environmental regulations. All this is now under challenge as Canadian corporations compete more directly against their southern counterparts. Canadian governments are also under pressure to adjust (or "harmonize downwards" as Canadian critics put it) their legislation on labor and environmental matters toward that of their North American trading partners. As one critic puts it:

To adjust to this new reality (of CUFTA) governments have been under pressure to eliminate many features that make the Canadian economy distinctive. Aligning cost and regulatory structures has meant weakening unions and forcing down wages, social and labor standards, environmental standards, corporate taxes, and social program spending (Campbell, 1993, 96).

The Australian Situation

The circumstances in Australia are different. At least something identifiably Australian in the realm of popular culture has survived the globalizing process.

From the vantage point of the 1960s, it appeared Australia would go the way of Canada. The Australian film industry was moribund and the new commercial TV channels were almost totally reliant on cheap American product for their drama content. Since the 1960s, Australian film has flourished, as has Australian TV drama. As in Canada, the Australian government promoted Australian content, in large part because of concerns about national cultural sovereignty. The pressure to do so came from Australian cultural elites (prominent among whom were media workers) worried about incipient U.S. domination of the Australian scene and about employment prospects for Australians.

In the case of TV, these concerns prompted the government to insist that reluctant TV proprietors increase their Australian content, including drama. By 1993, the government's Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) required the "free-to-air" commercial channels to include at least 50 percent "local content" material between the hours of 6 to 12 pm. This has recently been increased to 55 percent by the year 1998. These rulings include stipulated levels of first-run Australian drama (difficult to quantify in hours per week because the rules involve a complex point system linked to quality and price factors, as well as hours of transmission). Such drama must be written by — and for the most part acted by — Australians (at least 50 percent of the lead actors and 75 percent of the major supporting cast). The ABA states that its objective is for drama programs which cover "Australian themes", in which "the language is Australian", as are "the idiom or accents" and the character of production is Australian, in the sense that locations, props, etc. are "recognizably Australian" (ABA, Trends & Issues, Oct. 1993 p.27).

While there is no parallel rule that film distributors and exhibitors show a certain proportion of Australian films, the government has provided significant financial assistance to the local industry. Again, the Australian Film Commission and other bodies assisting the industry have made it a condition of any financial assistance that the films in question are predominantly "Australian" in direction, acting and themes.

In sharp contrast to Canada, the Australian experience with TV drama production has been that despite the small market, local productions can be popular and financially viable (even though they cost some ten times more than imports). Indeed, the industry now recognizes that for high ratings it is almost essential to run local productions. The ratings make it clear that Australian audiences like Australian product, and more in depth opinion analyses show that (other things being equal) they actually prefer Australian shows (ABA, Trends & Issues, October 1993). Mini-series portraying themes from Australian history have been particularly successful. The response to Australian film production has also been strong, again especially with productions like "A Man from Snowy River" which feature a romanticized view of Australia's past.

Cultural Border Management

There is no doubt that in the absence of state intervention there would have been no flourishing local TV drama industry because of the relative cheapness of the imported product. Australian efforts to limit the incursions of foreign shows have worked. In effect this is a case of cultural border management. The original impetus to require Australian content and to encourage Australian film production may have been inspired in part by the job protection concerns of media workers. But in putting their case for public regulation or financial assistance advocates invariably cast their claims in nationalist terms. The emotive and politically telling line has been that Australia needs Australian writers and artists to tell "Australian" stories to Australians, otherwise we will be overwhelmed by other people's stories. Behind this claim is the presumption that there is a story to tell and that Australia is a nation with a unique history and heritage out of which has emerged a distinctive cultural identity. The success of this argument in shaping government responses is reflected in the ABA guidelines for local drama cited above.

This is not to say that the cultural defenses have been entirely effective. Some of the material produced owes a great deal to the American exemplar. It is also by no means clear that the existing borders will be sufficient to stem the inflow of overseas product. The effort to sustain local TV content goes against the grain of deregulatory policies favored by all governments in Australia since the 1990s. The spirit of these policies was reflected in the former Labor government's willingness to allow overseas proprietors to control most of our newspapers and one of Australia's three TV networks, Channel 10. Despite explicit ABA regulations to the contrary, this station is 57 percent owned (and apparently managed) by the Canadian CanWest corporation (Australian, October 23, 1995). The government has also permitted News Limited through Foxtel to hold a major stake in the Australian pay-TV industry. This could be the Trojan horse for foreign content domination of Australian TV.

So far, the regulations controlling local content provisions for the pay-TV stations have been remarkably *laissez-faire*. They are even less demanding than the regulations governing Canada's admittedly limited pay-TV networks

(Collins, 1990, 84). The only requirement specified in the current ABA draft guidelines for pay-TV is that TV licensees who provide a service devoted predominantly to drama must "ensure that at least 10% of their program expenditure each year in relation to that service is spent on new Australian drama programs" (ABA, "Guidelines for the pay-TV 'new Australian drama' licence condition", September 1995). Should pay-TV eventually dominate the "free-to-air" stations as cable (though not pay-TV) has done in Canada, then under the current rules international (mainly U.S. product) may ultimately prevail.

Australian Content

The ABA has succeeded with its Australian content rules in stimulating the production of drama which is recognizably Australian. The successful Australian programs like the top rating 1996 series "Blue Heelers," do exhibit a "sense of place" which is undoubtedly Australian in their rural, sunny and rustic settings. They typically also feature "Australian" values in their emphasis on matey egalitarianism. Regardless of occupation and wealth, the major characters are shown interacting without the kind of status hang-ups common to British society. Indeed, it is sometimes said that this is one of the reasons why Australian shows are so popular with British audiences. The national heritage element has also been prominent. As noted earlier, the many highly-rated Australian mini-series productions broadcast during the 1980s often drew on a heroic and romanticized version of Australia's past.

The emphasis on these themes has prompted criticism from cultural commentators and ethnic intellectuals alike that Australian TV excludes much of the reality of Australia's urban cultural diversity. Thus the claim, most systematically spelled out in Jacobowicz *et al's* recent book *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*, that the TV media portray an unreal picture of Australia, sometimes offensively ignoring the ethnic presence, at other times stereotyping ethnics in a negative way. As Jacobowicz *et al* put it:

As we viewed the hours of television, and read our collection of newspapers and magazines, we realized that the most significant use of non-Anglo Australians was to mark boundaries. Non-Anglo Australians were included as contrast with the "normal" — the audience addressed by the advertisements but also the audience that was expected to be watching the news or reading the

press. These others, these “non-normals”, were included either as exotic accessories to the physical backdrop, for example in food advertisements, as tourist attractions or as threats to boundaries — boat people, for example (Jacubowicz, 1994, 54).

Others argue that “Australian” imagery as portrayed in the media functions as a form of deliberate assimilation, antagonistic to minority aspirations to celebrate their cultures. But the most insistent and serious criticism is that “Australian” content presents an Australian identity which is fundamentally exclusive. As one cultural critic puts it, Australian nationalism has taken on a particularly exclusive, Eurocentric definition of the nation” (Turner, 1995, 122). The ABA does actually state in the introduction to its Australian content regulations that one of the objectives is to “recognize the diversity of cultural backgrounds represented in the Australian community.”

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But it must be admitted that this objective has not been achieved. Ethnic-Australians are largely ignored in Australian content. Programmers almost invariably seek to attract a mass audience which is predominantly made up of Australian or British-born viewers, most of whom appear to like the traditional images. The advertisers, who have much hanging on the popularity of the images they link to the products they are selling, also seem to think that these “Aussie” images are popular. Thus, as Turner astutely notes, “When Telecom wants to flog its frontline high-tech product (a mobile phone) what does it do? It dresses a suntanned blond male in an Akubra and a pair of shorts, pops him in a four-wheel-drive, and sends him bush with an American tourist!” (Turner, 1995, 8).

Many viewers of ethnic origin must be watching these images too, since the high rating Australian TV programs do just as well in Sydney and Melbourne as elsewhere, despite the fact that in both cities around 35 percent of the adult

populations are overseas-born, mostly in non-English-speaking countries. This viewing does not deny the possibility that some of these people feel excluded in the material. However it is interesting to note that SBS, the government-financed TV station which began operating in 1980 and whose goal is to provide material relevant to ethnic audiences, only attracts around three percent of the Melbourne and Sydney viewing audience.

Issues in Dispute

The critics would like to see a more prescriptive approach to “Australian” content in which programmers are required to incorporate a greater diversity of ethnic images. For some this would contribute to a larger goal in which Australia finds a new cultural identity featuring diversity itself. According to Donald Horne, one of Australia’s best known cultural commentators, “we have a chance to show the world a tolerant nation-state in which there is no ethnic definition of nationality. Instead there could be a civic definition of an Australian” (Horne, 1993, 218). Under the umbrella of this civic definition Horne, like many other critics of old Australia, imagines that we could celebrate our ethnic diversity. In similar vein, the cultural critic, Graeme Turner, argues for a redefinition of Australia in which “difference should actually be constitutive of identity” (Turner, 1995, 124). For him, SBS embodies the ideal characteristics of the new Australia, because “SBS emphasizes its lack of unity, its multiplicity of objectives, its refusal to construct its audience as unified, singular, conceivable” (Turner, 1995, 125).

There is little chance that these ideas will appeal beyond a narrow intellectual and ethnic elite. For ordinary people, including, I suspect, many of ethnic origin, there is a deep desire to be part of a larger community with common aspirations and bonds. In secular societies the nation provides the outermost boundary of such community consciousness. In a competitive world economy, where nations, rather than regions or cities within nations, compete for supremacy or survival, it is the nation which serves as the community of destiny. Ordinary people or parochials (to make clear the contrast between cosmopolitans like Horne and Turner), want to feel that they belong to a powerful and meaningful community. For most, the nation represents this community. They want the protection and security that the national community — at least potentially — offers in a competitive, threatening world. This is one of the

reasons why they tend to be more concerned about defense issues than those with more advanced education (Bean, 1995).

For many ordinary people, the well-being of their community or nation also helps provide some moral bearings and direction, otherwise lacking in a secular age. Ideas about creating a better society for fellow community members and about passing on something better for future generations help give a sense of larger purpose. People who feel this way like to think of themselves as “us” or “we” — that is, to value the aspects of their society which mark them as members of the national community. Inevitably such people do not respond favorably to appeals to difference or Turner’s post-modernist enthusiasm for “lack of unity.”

If this is the case, and the producers of popular culture feel constrained to give the mass public what it wants, then we are surely in for more of the “Australian content” the critics decry. This does not mean that we must lament for the allegedly “excluded” ethnic audience. There is another side to the “Australian” values and symbols embedded in Australian content other than the “exclusive” elements referred to earlier.

‘Australian’ Cultural Values

To make this point requires a brief reference to the federation era when Australian nationalists first proclaimed the characteristics they regarded as distinctly “Australian.” Their underlying idea was to identify Australia with “new world” ideas. These they defined in opposition to the “old world” ideas which they took to characterize Britain and Europe. The Australian “New world” was to be free from the class, caste, and religious divisions of the old. Like nationalists everywhere they wanted to develop principles which differentiated the Australian “people” from those elsewhere, and which put them in a favorable light. The core “Australian” values as defined then and since were status and class equality; values which derived directly from their “new world” aspirations.

Given this background, it is not surprising that federation-era nationalists found the language of citizenship an attractive vehicle to express these ideas. By emphasizing the importance of each Australian’s status as a citizen they were drawing attention to what each shared in common with all others. In this sense citizenship embodied ideas of class and status equality. Nor is it surprising that federation-era Labor party leaders (particularly Billy Hughes) embraced the language of citizenship in putting their case for economic and social reform on behalf of workers (Birrell, 1995, 209-214). This language offered working men and women a degree of equality with middle- and upper-class strata which was barely conceivable in Britain at the time.

The relevance of this background to the issues under discussion is that the “Australian identity” which evolved from this setting was potentially inclusive, in that it implied that all should hold a valued place in the new Australian community regardless of occupation or religion (Birrell, 1995). There were various institutional expressions of the idea, but perhaps the clearest was the development of state-financed and secular primary education systems through all the colonies in the late 19th Century. Reformers wanted all children, regardless of class or religion, to join the new schools. An indication of the spirit behind the initiatives is the statement of the Victorian Jewish politician, Edward Cohen, speaking in support of early 1870s legislation to create the Victorian “free, compulsory and secular” state education system. Cohen declared:

This being a free country let us leave behind us all the superstitious nonsense of the old world. Let us here meet on common ground. Let us send our children to the same schools irrespective of creed or country; and let them here be brought up in that creed of kindness and friendship which will make them forget that their creeds divide them (Cited in Birrell, 1995, 51).

Most children (regardless of class), including those of Jewish origin, did join the colonial primary systems. The great exception was the Roman Catholics, who were proscribed from attending by their religious leaders. This was a matter of great regret to Australian nationalist leaders of the late nineteenth century like Alfred Deakin. They hoped for an inclusive community in which Australians would be able to bury “old-world” differences.

The Inclusive Potential of 'Australian' Values

It is true that the early nationalists put limits on whom they were prepared to accept in the new "inclusive" community. Sadly, their range of eligibles excluded Aborigines and non-whites, who were regarded on racist grounds as incapable of sharing these community ideals. In more recent decades, however, as attitudes to non-whites and Aborigines have changed, these same "Australian" values have provided the moral foundation for arguments against the continued exclusion of those formerly considered "ineligible" to join the Australian community. Thus the appeal to longstanding ideas of a "fair go" or "one man's as good as another" to justify opportunity and equal dignity to those once devalued. The same point can be made about ethnic Australians. As suggested earlier, most ethnic-Australians want to be part of an inclusive community. This being the case, the celebration of "Australian" values may actually serve to promote their interests since this celebration helps to remind Anglo-Australians of their obligations to the wider community. Ethnic-Australians have good reason to embrace as their own an Australian heritage which embodies values which legitimate their claim to full membership of the nation.

No doubt critics will respond by arguing that the preference in Australian programming for blonde, Anglo exemplars is an implicit rejection of non-Anglo claims for acceptance. Fortunately we do seem to be moving away from this pattern. Non-Anglos were taking roles within the mainstream media which have no reference to their ethnic or Aboriginal background. The Martin D'Estasio character in "Frontline," a highly successful TV show which, since 1995, has satirized Australian current affairs programs, is a case in point. Despite the actor's previous identification with ethnic roles, and the "ethnic" name, this background appears to have no relevance for the "Frontline" role of chief-investigating reporter which he fills. The rapid movement of second generation southern and eastern European men and women into professional and managerial roles ensures that it will soon be a routine matter for such persons to occupy elite positions in Australian society, including the mass media.

This process will not be advanced if critics continue to insist on labeling Australians according

to their ethnic origin or continue to campaign for a "hard" form of multiculturalism which seeks the perpetuation of ethnic communities across the generations. Australia has so far managed to avoid Canada's fate. One of the more important defenses Australians have against being submerged into an undifferentiated international society dominated by U.S. and Japanese multinationals is our sense of identity as Australians. It would be ironic indeed if this defense were eroded by well-meaning critics in the name of ideals of diversity. Such ideals have little chance of surviving against the global media onslaught without the protection of a strong nation-state. But as the Canadian experience suggests, a strong nation-state is unlikely to survive without an underlying sense of community solidarity, hinged to a distinct sense of identity. **TSC**

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