

Considering Australia's Post-Imperial Identity

How can it be sustained with immigrant inflow?

Book Review by Mark Wegierski

Australian experience mirrors that of other Western nations today. In the aftermath of World War II and especially of the so-called Sixties revolutions, longstanding traditions of nation, religion, family, and law and order, have come under increasing attack in Western and European countries. While those countries in eastern and central Europe that would have embraced tradition as a democratic choice were consigned to be devoured by Stalin's terror-apparatus, in Western Europe and North America, a much different, and far "softer," psychological approach, was employed against the "old verities," by what later came to be called "the managerial-therapeutic regime." While ostensibly far "softer," the effects of the massive transformations engendered by the managerial-therapeutic regime (in conjunction with such discrete factors as the burgeoning media and technological revolutions), were in some ways as "total" and "thoroughgoing" as those attempted by Stalin.

One of the most obvious effects of these various social revolutions was that the overarching national identities of many Western countries, which had, only a short time ago, appeared rock-solid, super-tough, and virtually impermeable, came under increasingly powerful attacks. Everything centered on traditional Western national identities somehow became contingent, weak, insupportable, highly questionable. There occurred not

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only the crumbling of the once-vast, Western colonial empires, but also the weakening of all the Western national cultures on their own home soil. Indeed, it became increasingly fashionable to describe such countries as Canada, the United States, and Britain as integrally and emphatically "multicultural."

Australia, which is perhaps the remotest of the European outposts with a large European-descended majority, has gone through this process as well. Paul

Sheehan's book could be seen as a meditation on the past, present, and future of Australian identity. With the fading of British imperial identity as a serious force on the planet, Australia is likely to be beset with an ongoing identity crisis, much like Canada.

The Australian situation is in some ways more difficult than that of

Canada. Australia is a manifestly *southern* continent, with a unique climate utterly different from that of Europe. The differences in the physical environment between English-speaking Australians' places of origin, and the unique Australian climate, can in themselves be seen as a source of psychic dissonance. Australia's environment is simply *unlike* any found in Europe.

Furthermore, Australia, with its population of nineteen million, lies relatively close to the many teeming Asian societies, such as India, China, Vietnam, or the Philippines. Demographically-speaking, it appears Australia will have almost no chance of weathering the coming population

storm. What Sheehan appears to hope is that a new planetary ecological direction will help to prevent Australia from being overrun by such vast population movements, which would obviously utterly destroy the precarious Australian environment.

Finally, there is the issue of the Aboriginal Australian population, which although a tiny minority, is

Among the Barbarians

by Paul Sheehan
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now having extensive privileges conferred on it, because of its cherished, indigenous status. This resembles the situation in Canada, where the rights of the majority of ordinary Canadians are undermined between the arising of the aboriginal peoples (Indians, Metis, and Inuit), who wish to *exclusively* claim all the rights and status of a native population, immemorially linked to the land, and the aggressive multiculturalism now espoused by visible minority leaderships.

Most Western nations today face a pressing problem of attempting some kind of positive reconstruction of their national identities, in the face of almost continual attacks. What is often needed is “a new national poetry.” Indeed, Sheehan's book may be seen as a work of nation-building, similar in some ways to the endeavors of the Romantic poets of Continental Europe, though obviously more prosaic and matter-of-fact. It may be imagined that for many Australians, the book tugs on varied patriotic and emotional heartstrings.

Sheehan is quite astute in his attempted definition of a new, post-imperial Australian identity, which he obviously hopes will endure for far into the future.

These are among the most salient aspects of this identity, as sketched by Sheehan: (1) The emergence of Australia as an “ecological superpower,” with control of all its surrounding waters and Antarctica. Very close attention and care is to be paid to the always fragile Australian environment. There is the necessity of population and immigration limitation because of the recognition of the comparatively small carrying capacity of the Australian continent. Australian ecological consciousness is seen as the polar opposite of Asian indifference to the environment. (2) There is the attempt to recognize and bring Aboriginal Australia into the Australian national identity, which is also related to the comparatively greater closeness of the Aborigines to the unique Australian environment (the vast, hot desert generally known as the Outback). Aboriginal Australia is seen as a counterweight to Asia and excessive Asian immigration. (3) The preservation of the broadly democratic, caring, sharing Australian welfare-state (or

so-called “mateship”) is hoped for, as against its overwhelming by too large numbers of newcomers, or by rapacious international corporations. (4) The recognition of certain aspects of quality of life, notably, the emphasis on sport as important to Australians - again a factor differentiating Australia from Asia.

Sheehan has certainly made a good attempt to weave together the various strands from which a newer, yet somewhat traditional Australian identity could emerge. What is also interesting is his description of the process by which traditional Australian identity was undermined — a process which appears to have parallels in almost every Western and European country.

The dynamic, which Sheehan is surprisingly frank in describing, consists of a liberal or left-liberal party opening the borders of a country to large, dissimilar immigration, grabbing continual electoral support from those immigrant groups (who are also usually given easier access to a country's citizenship than had traditionally occurred), while at the same time building power-blocs based on the diverting of state resources to immigrant spokespersons, and creating a whole new infrastructure of “multiculturalism.” And part of this infrastructure is a series of laws and enforcement bodies directed against “hate-speech” and “hate-crimes” — which are often increasingly broadly defined to mean *any* criticism of the system.

While Sheehan's description of this dynamic is cogent, one matter he might have looked at more closely is the fact that the over-all electoral success of such a left-liberal party is often somewhat tangential to its immigration policies. For example, many native-born persons would vote for such a party because they perceive it as offering better social services, or better management of the economy. (It might indeed be a bit puzzling *why* immigration/multiculturalism is so zealously, doggedly, single-mindedly pursued by a portion of the elites, when it might not, in the final analysis, be *that* important to over-all electoral success.) Because of the apparent ease with which a liberal or left-liberal party builds coalitions, e.g., offering something for senior citizens, for small businesspeople, for young people, and

“Labor spent more than a billion dollars building a system of patronage, dependence and influence among ethnic groups.”
(p.96)

so forth, it is extraordinarily difficult to have an election fought with opposition to high immigration and to the excesses of multiculturalism playing a prominent part. For example, Pauline Hanson's One Nation movement (about which Sheehan writes extensively), has already virtually disappeared from Australian politics. In Canada, the right-leaning Reform Party appears unlikely to make

headway against the perennial Liberal majority in the federal Parliament.

In the increasingly troubled times we face, a book such as Sheehan's can serve as one possible guiding light towards a better course of events. **TSC**