

Being Australian is not a race but an attitude

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We come from all lands, but we are united in our diversity.
Photo: John Shakespeare

Captain Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet landed on Sydney Cove 222 years ago today and proclaimed a new colony. Before Phillip set sail he wrote to the then home secretary, Lord Sydney. "From the moment his Majesty's forces take possession of the country: That there can be no slavery in a free land, and consequently no slaves." A sound founding proclamation from our founding father, 20 years before the abolishment of the slave trade in the British Empire.

Today we Australians will celebrate Australia Day around the world. I will be in Narrandera, in the Riverina District, fulfilling my duties as

an Australia Day ambassador. Australia Day will mean different things to different people. For many it is a day of celebration, for some it is a day of survival. I believe Australia Day is a unique opportunity to come together as one people, sharing one destiny. On Australia Day, we do not observe national self-glorification or celebrate in a spirit of boastfulness. It is a day of commemoration. Most importantly it is a day of commitment. A commemoration of the past, and a commitment to the future: to Australia, our values and our people.

One People

Our elected leaders seem to struggle to define what it means to be an Australian but have no trouble in labelling someone, or some act, as un-Australian. I do not agree with the policy and theory of multiculturalism, as it is defined and practised. I believe it is flawed with its narrow focus on diversity and on the other. And sadly its meaning was never elucidated beyond tasting a different cuisine each night. Instead I believe in unity in diversity, with an emphasis on the unity. As the German philosopher Goethe said, "rather than divide and rule, it is better to unite and lead".

We must stop this flawed policy of dividing people up into ethnic minorities and embrace the vision of One People, One Destiny. Multiculturalism promotes an ideal of segregation not integration or engagement. It robs people of a common shared destiny as Australians. It robs me of my identity as an Australian.

We can appreciate and acknowledge our respective heritage and beliefs as long as it does not conflict with the values of our liberal democracy. I always believed that being Australian is not a race but an attitude. It is about having and believing in a set of shared values. It is a civic rather than an ethnic conception of nationhood.

I was born in Sri Lanka and my story, like most migrant stories, is a tale of access to opportunity. My family escaped the ravages of war to seek a better life in Australia. The fact that I was born in Sri Lanka makes me, in many people's eyes, a Sri Lankan. But I am an Australian. Period. And proud of it. I do not believe in hyphenated nationalities. Why do I need to defend my Australianness in my own country? In Europe, where I am based, all my friends consider me as an Aussie. Never once did they ask: "So where are you really from?" In fact they've anointed me Australia's de facto ambassador to Europe.

Let me use an example. I have a friend who was adopted, and she says that "her mother and the woman who gave birth to her are two different people". It is similar for me: the country that I was born in and my motherland are two different countries. Australia is my motherland. A good mate of mine once said: "Mate, you are more Aussie than Kath and Kim."

We all have a heritage – I have a Saiva Tamil Hindu one – but it does not conflict with my identity as an Australian. Whether your ancestry is from the British Isles or from the Dreamtime we should appreciate that. But our nationality is Australian. This is what unity in diversity means. We all came to this country in different canoes but we are all in the same boat now.

One Destiny

On our coat of arms there are two beasts of nature. Both the kangaroo and emu can't move backwards easily. Therefore, we together must Advance Australia. I truly believe in the words of our national anthem, it commands us to Advance Australia and "to make this Commonwealth of ours, renowned of all the lands". But as that is in the second verse, we may have difficulty remembering all the words.

Liberty is forgiving of many failings. But it forgives neither apathy nor neglect. It took federated Australia more than a century to get us where we are today. When the founding fathers at Federation said One People, One Destiny, they initially did not mean people like me. In fact people of my complexion were not even included in the census. Australia is a work in progress, not a finished product. That is why it is up to each one of us to continue that shared vision today, ever mindful of our common destiny.

So what makes an Australian? For me what makes an Australian is not the food you eat, the colour of your skin or the God you worship. Nor being born on Australian soil or holding a passport constitutes you being an Australian. What makes an Australian for me is what you feel in your heart, looking out for your mates, helping them out in times of strife, an acceptance and an appreciation of unity in diversity and a fair go for everyone, irrespective of their background. What makes a person an Australian is quite simply a clear commitment to Australia, which overrides every other consideration.

As former prime minister Bob Hawke said of modern Australia: "If once we grasp the fact that the original inhabitants represent some 2000 generations, how utterly insignificant, then, becomes the difference between those of us who can claim a few generations in our Australian genealogy, and those of us who were born overseas – wherever born or how recently arrived . . . in Australia, there is no hierarchy of descent. There must be no privilege of origin. The commitment is all. The commitment to Australia is the one thing needful to be a true Australian."

And this is what being Australian is all about.

Prashanth Shanmugan is an Australia Day ambassador. He blogs at: www.shanmugan.com.

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»«

»Being a migrant myself (born in Britain to an English father & Finnish mother) and having a family of migrants (Ukrainian wife, Scottish sister-in-law, Malaysian sister-in-law, South Australian brother-in-law, soon-to-be Chinese sister-in-law) I can whole heartedly agree that its your attitude that makes you an Australian. I'm probably prouder to be an Australian citizen than a lot of Australian-born people, because I believe that Australia is the best country in the world - bar none, strewth! While I regard Australia as the most racially tolerant country, I do have concerns that the politics of Little Johnny & the Mad Monk are degrading the level of tolerance in the country and focusing on our unity as one people regardless of birthplace is the correct way to go.«

»«

HarryC | Melbourne - January 26, 2010, 10:50AM

»«

»Well said, Prashanth.

I do have one criticism, "But I am an Australian. Period. And proud of it."

It should read "But I am an Australian. Full Stop. And proud of it." !«

»«

JohnB | Melbourne - January 26, 2010, 9:31AM

»«

»No disagreement with Prashanth's sentiments... my only worry is that these are abstractions and do not seem to press for any kind of tangible responsibility or civic on anyone proclaiming Ozzieness. I have direct and personal experience of migrants (under the skilled category) particularly from South east Asia for whom getting an Australia passport is a cynical means to maximize the relatively free spending social benefits of the Australian system like tertiary education, unemployment benefits and "assistance" for all sorts of vague ills while keeping a financial foot in their home country. Many skilled migrant families come with 1 parent, extract a variety of single parent benefits while the other parent remain in the home country earn high wages. These wages are not reported with Australian Taxation. They buy homes in the toniest parts of Australia while claiming every conceivable benefit without having paid a day's worth of taxes. This is becoming the MO of many migrating families. Shame on these people and shame on the Australia Bureaucracies that let this misuse happen. I hope more Ozzies will demand action on curbing these abuses and restore some checks and equity in the system.

I hope this letter will spur the writer, if he is fair-dinkum, to comment on the civic commitment like paying taxes, joining Australia's arm forces, working for the Australia community, for all who extract from Australian's bounty.«

»«

NoFairGoHere - January 26, 2010, 9:24AM

»«

»"United in our diversity" make sense.«

»So does

abundant in our scarcity

good in our evil

bald in our hairiness

mad in our sanity

clever in our stupidity

fat in our thinness

cautious in our daring«

»are we mad ?«

»«

Robert - January 26, 2010, 11:36AM

»«

»Robert: an English vocab lesson for you:«

»Diversity - the quality of difference or variety«

»United - being joined into a single entity«

»So I think you'll find the phrased "united in our diversity" does make sense in a way that all your examples do not. Unity is not the opposite or the antonym of diversity, and the phrase is not contradictory.«

»«

Abacus | Melbourne - January 26, 2010, 11:55AM

»«

»NoFairGoHere: interesting that you don't mention the non-migrant Australians who bludge on Centrelink, try scamming government benefits and don't join the Army and wonder if they are "fair dinkum". Civic commitment is not only up to migrants, and the majority of us would fall far short of the bar you set to legitimately "extract from Australian's bounty".«

»«

Abacus | Melbourne - January 26, 2010, 11:50AM

»«

»NoFairGoHere, the kind of abuses you refer to are rampant. For example, I know an Indonesian couple (who live in Indonesia but have some form of residency here, after attending university here) who traveled back here to give birth and claim the baby bonus. Not to mention clogging up our hospitals and getting us to pay for that too. Then they got right back on a plane and went home. Delightful!«

»Australians are right to be cynical. And yes, Abacus, we need to take out the local trash too ...«

»«

Andrew | Melbourne - January 26, 2010, 4:18PM

»«

»This article really moved me, truly a beautiful article. Being born in Australia from Vietnamese decent I have a hard time convincing a group of people that I am Australian. We all live in one country, under one flag and most importantly one community. Being Australian really is from the heart.«

»«

Sally Trang | Melb - January 26, 2010, 4:13PM

»«

»What is all this crap? It's just a frigging piece of dirt with people on it.«

»Give it a rest.«

»Constitutionally there is no such thing as an Australian, it is only endowed by statute written in 1949.«

»And I guess this writer knows nothing about the enslavement of aborigines, the kidnapping and enslavement of Kanakas from the Pacific Islands, the stealing of aboriginal kids and the cultural genocide that has been happening for over 220 years now.«

»Give it a rest with this over blown, nationalist tripe please.«

»«

Marilyn - January 26, 2010, 3:41PM

»«

»As a student of human nature, migrating to Australia from the US more than 30 years ago was like striking the mother lode. My conclusion: it is all about attitude. Chill out. Don't stress. Take it easy. She'll be right. To be Aussie is to live in the moment, to not be obsessed with the past or anxious about the future. I love it. But I hate how Aussies are becoming Yanks -- driven, obsessed with stuff, finger-waggers, tut-tutters, navel gazers, even bloody bible bashers! Mind your own business. Live and let live. Be nice. Cruise. We're doing just fine. If you don't like it, don't let the door hit you on the way out!«

»«

M T Pockets - January 26, 2010, 3:04PM

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