

Who owns the National Identity?

GREGORY MELLEUSH

Claims that the ABC, the Australia Council or any other government agency has a special role in shaping the national identity should sound warning bells.

DURING the current debate regarding the future of the ABC an argument has emerged that the ABC has a special role expressing and preserving the Australian national identity. I first heard this view stated by Quentin Dempster on Radio National but it also turned up in an article written by Morag Fraser for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. If we are to recognize that the ABC has a 'special' role in relation to the national identity then we must also accept that what comes out of the ABC on this matter is equally 'special', and more worthy of our attention than what emanates from other sources. This strikes me as an extraordinarily dangerous doctrine, not least because of the particularly negative attitude to the national identity that one finds expressed in parts of the ABC. It does, however, raise a larger issue which is who, if anyone, owns the Australian national identity, and if any particular group or institution should be given special status to express and represent it.

The doctrine of the 'special' role of the ABC would seem to be founded on the belief that the national identity is owned by the government or the state. As the government owns the national identity equally it is free both to define its nature and then to promulgate it through its various agencies. The role of the citizenry is passive; it should follow where the government leads and adjust its views as the state decrees. The ABC is spe-



cial because it presents the country with each new updated version of the national identity: one day more multicultural, the next republican, the following day a new Asian emphasis.

The account above may sound a little extreme but there can be little doubt that the reign of the 'big picture man' was marked by a series of attempts to transform the Australian identity so that it accorded more with Keating's policies and 'vision'. Keating, himself, spoke proudly of the cultural shift that he believed was taking place in Australia, and he linked this shift to the policies that his govern-

ment was pursuing, including multiculturalism, Mabo, the republic and the Industrial Relations Act. In *Creative Nation*, the statement of his government's cultural policy, a pointed contrast was made between the narrow culture of Australia's past and the dynamic multiculturalism culture of contemporary Australia. He believed that the place of government was to exercise leadership and to move the country even further down the road away from an older Australian identity to a newer, dynamic one that accorded with his view of Australia and its place in the world. Such a view of the Australian national identity is founded on what Walter Ullmann has termed the "descending theory of government". Ideas are formulated at the top and then imposed on the citizenry: it is the cultural equivalent of a command economy.

PRIVILEGED STATUS: There are a number of objections to this vision of the national identity. The first is that it accords a special place to a small group of people who are left in charge of deciding the nature of the national identity. In effect this means a small group of intellectuals who manage to capture the ear of the government and who seek to impose their vision of the national identity on the rest of us. It is interesting to recall in this regard that when the so-called 'Ideas Summit' was held in 1989 only those holding to a liberal and/or socialist-humanist

Dr Gregory Melleuish teaches politics at the University of Wollongong and is the author of Cultural Liberalism in Australia (CUP).

view of the world were invited to attend. In an act of the grossest philistinism both churchmen and anyone tainted by association with neo-classical economics were excluded. The same type of intellectual — the left-liberal humanist — is to be found in the ABC. True, the ABC does possess a religious affairs department but it also is dominated by left liberals more interested in social change than traditional religious concerns.

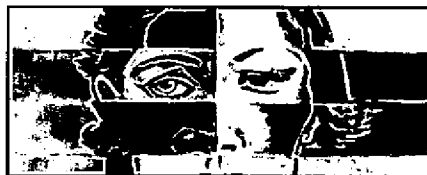
The desire by certain left-liberal intellectuals to exercise hegemonic control over both Australian cultural life and the national identity must make us extremely wary of any attempt by the government or any of its agencies, be it the ABC or the Australia Council, to acquire a special role regarding the national identity. One can see this most clearly in the contribution that left-liberal intellectuals have made to discussions about the national identity during the past 15 years. They have presented the Australian past as a tale of the oppression of women, migrants and Aborigines. They have actively sought to discredit older versions of the Australian national identity as racist and sexist, in effect to demonize it as a blight on the landscape. It is not difficult to see why they would seek to paint it in the blackest of colours. If the established identity is so evil then the case for discarding it and creating a new one becomes a very powerful one. A discredited past demands a new start, and the left-liberal intelligentsia is quite happy to provide materials that the state can use to create that new identity.

The strength of these left liberals should not be underestimated. They most certainly had the ear of the 'big picture man'. The papers given at the Australian Historical Association's conference held recently in Melbourne demonstrate the extent to which they have captured the historical profession.

The real problem with according special status to such groups in the creation of the national identity is that it accords special status to what are essentially interest groups. Left-liberal intellectuals, whatever they may think, speak only for themselves and not for the Australian people as a whole. They are just another interest group pleading their case. As Bob Browning has

recently argued in his book *Bad Government* (Canonbury Press) they get heard more often than other groups because of the relationship that has grown up between what he calls the New Class, the government bureaucracy and such agencies as the ABC and the Australia Council. This does not mean that their views on Australian identity carry a special legitimacy. Rather it should be a warning to treat

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those who claim 'special' status on this matter, be it the Prime Minister, the ABC or any other institution, with great caution. There can be no guarantee that it is not just another case of special pleading.

MULTI-FACETED: For the truth of the matter is the Australian national identity belongs to the Australian people. This is to say no more than that the national identity is governed by the 'ascending theory of government'. It is created by the people in their activities as members of civil society, and then flows up through the political structure. The government and the state should do no more than reflect what the people have created.

In reality, however, the situation is somewhat more complicated. As Australian civil society is not simple but

complex and pluralist, composed of a whole range of associations, individuals and institutions, so we cannot expect the Australian national identity to be simple. It is instead multi-faceted because it is constantly being re-fashioned in different forms by a variety of groups and individuals. This is not to say that there is no Australian national identity. Rather it is to say that the national identity is a complex entity and that, in a pluralist civil society, it will find a variety of expressions. One can see this clearly in the history of the Australian national identity as different aspects of it have been expressed, from the individualistic bushman to the democratic egalitarian worker to the gallant ANZAC.

For this very reason no institution can be given a special place to expound or express what it believes to be the national identity. Its version of the national identity will only ever be partial and in need of being both corrected and complemented by the versions put forward by other individuals and institutions. To a certain extent this means that there always have been, and always will be, competing versions of the Australian national identity. In this case the only final court of appeal is what the Australian people feel comfortable with; as seen by what movies and television programs they watch, what books they read and the sorts of activities they attend. In the past the ABC, in line with the Keating vision of leadership, has sought not so much to follow the people as to lead them towards the preferred ABC version of the national identity. The advertisements might say that it's your ABC but too often it's been their national identity.

One could hope for a more democratic and responsive ABC, but that would not solve the fundamental problem involved in giving any institution a privileged position to define and express the national identity. In a pluralist society it makes far more sense to encourage that pluralism, and to build up a strong civil society that is able to give confident expression to its sense of the national identity. A vigorous democratic society is the best safeguard of our national identity, and we should be working to preserve that democracy rather than the privileges of particular institutions. ■