

---

## **REVIEWS**

---

### **The Way We Live**

Ross Terrill, *The Australians: The Way We Live Now*, Doubleday, Sydney, 2000

*Reviewed by Michael Keating*

This book is an interesting and lively interpretation of the Australian people and our nation as we embark upon our second century. Terrill is frankly optimistic about Australia; apparently more so than when the first edition of this book was published in 1987. He finds 'an Australia not without dignity and self-assurance.' Terrill is 'confident that Australia can hack it in a competitive world.' He sees 'nationalism as having matured. A leap has been made to reliance on technology and globalisation. Race has become a less vexatious issue. Australia is a more plutocratic society and (a little) more hard-nosed towards laggards.' 'The nation savours prosperity, stands tall in Southeast Asia, and tries to embrace globalisation without letting go of the Aussie way of life.'

Terrill argues that Australian nationalism has strengthened in the late twentieth century, but the meaning of this nationalism has become more opaque, as nationalism now offers varying points of entry for different people. For some it represents pride in Australia's commercial success. For others it is pride in Australian achievement in the arts. Increasingly Australians are being recognised internationally, and not just for uniquely Australian productions, but also for the development of themes that resonate internationally. We have now reached the point where Terrill argues that cosmopolitanism is just as strong an impulse as nationalism among Australians. 'Within Australia, neither Britishness, nor assertive Aussie nationalism, nor a disembodied multiculturalism, nor yet attachment to the land, could be the framework for the sense of identity of millions of people in a diverse society.'

Terrill concedes that 'It is possible, as some fear, that race and immigration, the sufferings of the bush, and various issues arising from globalisation will divide Australians in the midst of adjusting to a post-British and Asia-oriented world.' But he is optimistic because of the strength of Australia's admirable and well-tested institutions. Indeed, Terrill considers that the sharp lines of debate over identity have softened. 'More fundamental unity probably existed in Australia as the century ended than at any time since the outbreak of the Vietnam War.' 'It is morning for Australian civilisation', which Terrill hopes and expects will become Eurasian. But he doesn't argue about that vision with those who disagree, as 'it will come about through a thousand incremental decisions, and many involuntary

happenings, transcending the policy of any particular political party or the will of one generation’.

These conclusions seem likely to find an appreciative audience among many Australians. What is the basis for them; how authoritative are they? First, Terrill as a long-time expatriate Australian claims to combine the advantages of an outside perspective with a knowledge that only an insider can have. Certainly, Terrill draws compellingly on his knowledge of Australian history and his childhood remembrances. In addition, his shrewd and perceptive observations about many features of Australian life may have been sharpened by an understanding gained from living in another country. To bring himself up to date, Terrill seems to have relied largely on interviews with many prominent Australians and travel, particularly around northern Australia where he mainly seems to have mixed with the mining bosses and the local businesses. Their views are well portrayed. However, the views of other Australians and their concerns are often ignored in the selection of material presented.

Terrill commences with an excellent summary of Australian history up to the end of World War II and how that moulded us. The sense of Australian life in the 1940s and 1950s is very well evoked through his description of his own upbringing. As a contemporary who also grew up in rural Victoria before going on to Melbourne University, Terrill’s description has a familiar and authentic ring. The change in Australia since then is mainly developed by focussing on the administrations of the significant ‘tall poppy’ Prime Ministers from Menzies, through Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke and Howard. These are useful summaries, although hardly original, and it is not clear why Keating is dismissed.

Contemporary Australia is elucidated by descriptions of Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, Brisbane and Darwin which aim to draw out the contrasts between them. To my mind these descriptions rely too heavily on the conventional stereotypes of these cities. While Terrill reflects a common Australian perception that emphasises their differences, I think that what is outstanding about these major Australian cities is the extent of their similarity – much more similarity than exhibited by the major cities of other countries, including much smaller countries such as France or Britain. Moreover, one might argue that the differences *within* our major cities (culturally and economically) are more important than the differences between them, but Terrill ignores these differences and what they might tell us about contemporary Australia. Equally important, the differences between the metropolises and the way of life and views in the rest of the country are also passed over. But these are some of the divides that are currently most significant in Australian public policy making.

*The Australians* is also intended to allow Terrill to convey his point of view. Terrill is concerned about the influence of a ‘politically correct’ group whom he accuses of a type of social engineering. This new left is to be found in universities and the ABC and represents a break with the traditional agenda of Australian Labor. These self-righteous cultural gatekeepers are guilty of claiming group rights on behalf of ‘an assortment of self-styled “New Dispossessed”’: women, indigenous people, gay men and women, ethnic minorities, the environment seen

as a persona'. Terrill maintains that 'rights' need to be matched by 'obligations', a policy first resuscitated by the Keating Government in Working Nation, although Terrill is inclined to give the credit to Howard. Terrill also objects to what he regards as the intolerant methods of the 'New Dispossessed', and their alleged preference for the politics of redistribution over the politics of development.

Terrill's preference for development does not, however, make him a closet economic rationalist. He briefly *asserts* the conventional wisdom that 'Further business tax reduction and further industrial relations reform are required', but he also refers favourably to 'Public policies that favour the producer rather than the consumer'. In particular, Terrill is concerned to push the cause of the north which he envisages being 'dotted with cities, railways, natural gas pipelines, and world class holiday resorts'. Naturally the Alice Springs to Darwin railway meets with his approval, including on (dubious) defence grounds and despite the unwillingness of the defence authorities to ever contribute to its construction. It is claimed that mining 'is much more difficult these days. The main reason is aboriginal land rights'. However, no evidence is cited to substantiate this accusation, nor is there any consideration of the willingness of many miners to negotiate while they thought there was a chance of overturning the legislation. More generally Terrill considers that the north is being held back by the mentality of the leadership in the Sydney/Melbourne/Canberra corridor. Presumably this leadership, which has to find the money for the grand visions of the north, asks too many probing questions of a group who are already disproportionately dependent upon other taxpayers' funds. Moreover, it is difficult to see why the 'knowledge nation' would need or want to relocate from the temperate eastern seaboard to the mudflats of Darwin. Indeed most migrants, including those from Asia, disproportionately choose to live in Sydney and Melbourne.

Terrill also argues that 'completion of the move beyond the [regulated economy of the] Australian Settlement can only occur by a quasi-consensual evolution'. To hand down change from above is to invite contention. Terrill seems to favour change keeping in step with a changing culture, which takes time. His criticism of Keating and his favourable assessment of Howard seem to relate to Keating's disparagement of consensus politics and his willingness to move ahead of popular opinion in the hope that he would then be able to shape that opinion.

To my mind it is impossible to say categorically that one leadership style is better than another. It depends upon the circumstances. For example, surveys tell us that popular opinion has always opposed tariff cuts, but did it really help anyone in the long-run when Howard bowed to this opinion and postponed the previously announced tariff cuts for the motor vehicle and textile, clothing and footwear industries? This policy reversal inevitably reduced the certainty of future industry planning and encouraged future action by similar pressure groups. On the other hand, Howard has been prepared to lead from the front when he introduced the politically unpopular GST, and there is now considerable evidence that public opinion is coming around to accept this new tax system.

Overall there is much to admire in Terrill's analysis of *The Australians*. This book is very well written and is entertaining. Most of us will empathise with Terrill's sympathetic portrait of we Australians that mainly rings true. I agree with his optimism about our future and the quality of our society, but I also think we must avoid becoming complacent. In particular I think the divides in our society and the degree of uncertainty that accompanies those divides are more serious than Terrill has observed. A focus on political leadership and a comparison of our major cities is probably not the way to spot what troubles many Australians.

The picture that emerges from numerous other studies is somewhat less reassuring. Instead we are told that many Australians are worried at what they see as a loss of control over their lives. They no longer feel able to trust the boss when he says that their jobs are safe, not least because they doubt his capacity to make them so. Ditto for the government, only more so! Worst of all they are losing confidence in the family as the basic building block for a stable society. As Hugh Mackay has found, feminism has succeeded in giving women a desirable degree of independence, but it has also left both sexes uncertain about their respective roles as they try to balance career and family responsibilities. Equally tensions arise as adolescent children demand more independence over their lifestyle earlier, while staying financially dependent longer. Family breakdown, drug abuse, suicide and violent behaviour are some of the possible results as family ties and obligations weaken.

Society is also being increasingly organised along more individualistic lines. Loneliness afflicts many people. Even those who have contact with friends and relations complain about a scarcity of 'quality time'. Individual freedom has increased, with people being offered a greater range of choices and more independence. But many miss the spirit of community and the opportunity to participate as a member of a community. Rural communities have still retained that sense of group identity and that is helping many of them survive as attractive places to live. On special occasions that community spirit is also recaptured by our urban society and that is what makes events like the Olympic Games such a success.

Other divides that are confronting policy makers are the increasing gap between the knowledge rich and the knowledge poor, and the accompanying dispersion of work opportunities and earnings. Sometimes this is expressed in attitudes to information technology and globalisation. In both cases some people see these developments as an opportunity, while others see them as a threat. Many of those who feel most insecure feel they are on some sort of tread mill as they struggle to keep up with their material expectations. By contrast the material goods on offer are unable to satisfy *all* the needs of many of those who are able to command the new technologies and feel relatively secure. Their post material values put more emphasis on the quality of life, through a concern for the environment and the development of a broader range of cultural experience. Terrill's derogatory description of such concerns as part of the 'new dispossessed', while it might apply to some, is hardly fair nor effective if it is intended to apply

to the broad range of these different people. What Terrill fails to recognise, but which politicians ignore at their peril, is that those Australians who say they think life is getting better are slightly outnumbered by those who think it is getting worse. In addition, Newspoll found an overwhelming preference for reducing inequality even at a cost to economic growth. Of course perceptions are not necessarily matched by reality, but if we want to understand our fellow Australians perceptions are sometimes at least as important.

Terrill may be right that we are more united politically than we have been for some time, but in other respects we are more diverse and share less common experiences than we used to. Moreover even the apparent political unity may not be all that deep – a unity among a political elite, but with less grass roots support than ever before. As the Republic debate reminded us most people are turned off by our political parties which increasingly are seen as unrepresentative. Today the major political parties gather their votes from force of habit and the lack of an alternative rather than from commitment.

In addition, the adversarial style of Australian political debate has now been taken to extremes that arguably makes our system ill-equipped to respond to major policy challenges. For example, we took years to achieve tax reform as there was a natural tendency for one party to oppose whatever the other supported. And most recently Cabinet could not even discuss the reform of higher education once the Minister's Cabinet Submission was leaked, despite the universal agreement that continuation of the status quo is heading for disaster.

To my mind although there is evidence that many of Australia's institutions have adapted well to the challenges from technology, globalisation and the changing nature of our society, Australia does need to find a less confrontational method of solving its policy disputes. The future good governance of Australia demands that we repudiate the attitude that is currently held in some quarters that the spoils belong to the victor. Instead we need to more actively explore the opportunities for power sharing, and in that way each government may actually find that it is able to achieve more.

*Mike Keating is a Visiting Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences at The Australian National University.*