
A year of cultural indecision

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In a time of upheaval that calls out for strong leadership, confusion surrounds a number of crucial issues. MARY KALANTZIS and BILL COPE report

AS A nation, we stumbled from one cultural crisis to the next during 1997.

First there was the Government's response to the High Court's Wik decision, followed by the "stolen generation" report. Then there was the on-again, off-again debate about the republic and even whether we would have a debate at all.

Then came the Asian financial crisis and a new twist in the un-finished story of where we stand in relation to Asia. Most recently, a "discussion paper" was released which reopens the question of whether we should have multi-culturalism.

If there is a common political thread to each of these events, it is that the Howard Government is in reaction mode. It was as if Wik and the issue of the stolen generation came to the Government as a nasty surprise or as the result of unwarranted judicial activism.

Or as if the republic issue would work itself out once the good sense of maintaining our current constitutional framework became obvious. Or as if the Asian financial crisis might reaffirm the importance of our "European-ness" or our cultural connections with the Anglophone world.

Or even as if, were we to ask the question about multiculturalism again, we might be able to come up with something more bland and self-congratulatory focused on "our tolerance".

Indecisive, inclusive, reactive _ these are words we could use to describe our national leadership in 1997. Lacking a vision which focuses our attention forward and unable to anticipate where we as a country are going, we respond to crises of identity and nation as they arise. And, as a consequence, we respond inadequately.

However, there's a much more fundamental common theme to these cultural crises than stumbling political indecision. They raise deeply interrelated questions about who we are, the nature of our cultural inheritance, and our changing identity as we face the future.

These are the pre-eminent issues of the post-Cold War environment everywhere: the politics of identity, inclusion, belonging and nationhood in a world where local diversity and global integration have made monocultural nationalism an anachronistic and

destructive force. This truly big picture stuff is simply outside the field of vision of the Government.

But, in the very nature of our times, Howard finds himself having to spend most of his time dealing with the consequences of big-picture realities as they fall on us.

On Wik, for instance, indigenous rights have been increasingly recognised everywhere in the world. In many countries, these rights have extended to over-lapping sovereignty, partial self-government and the addition of another layer to federalism.

Nor are indigenous rights simply a contemporary legal issue; they also are a moral issue. Yet Howard says he does not view Wik as a moral issue. Nor does he see any need to apologise for government involvement in the removal of Aboriginal children from their parents. However, in a public debate so deeply involving concepts of discrimination and racism, and in a discussion in which the churches have played such a prominent role, indigenous rights are more a politico-moral question than anything else _ one that addresses the very fabric and moral legitimacy of our social contract.

Australia's response to these issues will affect our international standing as a modern nation _ as we are certain to discover in the next few years if we attempt to turn back the clock on the High Court's decisions.

On the republic, Howard was quite happy to scrap the whole discussion when the Senate suggested compulsory voting. Now that the constitutional convention is going ahead, the polls tell Howard he should not be too vocal in his preference for a British head of state.

So Howard issues the convention with an instruction to come up with a workable solution, at the same time as saying that the most popular republican alternative _ a directly elected head of state _ is unworkable. In this sense, the convention is set up to fail. In Howard's own mind there is no workable alternative to the British mon-archy and a two-week talkfest will demonstrate this by not coming up with an agreed alternative. This is hardly the stuff of great national leadership.

IF HOWARD is convinced of the superiority of the mon-archy, surely it is his responsibility to argue his case cogently. Instead, he is throwing down the gauntlet of ``well, you try and agree on something better" in the hope that what seems obvious to him will make itself apparent to others.

On the Asian financial crisis, Howard has adopted a ``told you so" kind of response to his Labor predecessors: that is, we need to keep up our links with the English-speaking world and Europe with which we have stronger historical and cultural affinities. So, in the Asian crisis, we have cast our lot with the financial bailouts sponsored by the International Monetary Fund.

The IMF conditions are seen by the more outspoken of Asian leaders, such as Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir, to be imposing Western-style free-market orthodoxies on economies which have boomed as a result of substantial government intervention. These conditions favour the repayment of international loans while disallowing government support for ailing local financial institutions and enterprises.

And they are increasingly resented throughout Asia as a new way of forcing Western entry to Asian markets.

The problem is that our economic lot is now irretrievably linked with that of Asia. We need to see the financial crisis from a regional point of view.

The chances are that the crisis will hasten the formation of a regional trading bloc as a response to perceived Western impositions, just as the European Union was formed as a counter-balance to the dominance of the United States.

Last week, Mahathir said that the response of ASEAN countries to the crisis must be to relate more closely to each other and to trade more with each other. We need to be in that bloc and not outside it. We need to be on the side of post-colonial futures and not colonial pasts _ hence the enormous significance of the republic issues to our standing in the region.

On multiculturalism, the Government has just launched a discussion paper. Given that the Prime Minister cannot bring himself to use the word, it is hardly surprising that the focus of discussion is on whether we should use the word _ a word which has been an ordinary part of our political lexicon for a quarter of a century now and which, as a May Newspan reported, enjoys 78 percent popular support.

This comes from the Government that abolished the Office of Multicultural Affairs in the Prime Minister's Department; that removed the immigration portfolio from Cabinet for the first time in the post-war era; and the first Government in the half-century of post-war migration to cut immigration in a time of economic upswing.

The Government's actions represent at least tacit agreement with the agenda of the far right One Nation extremists _ a point not lost on the media and public in the other countries of our region.

The best Howard can come up with as a statement of national self-definition is tolerance, a kind of self-congratulatory view of ``us" who have been generous enough to put up with ``them".

In any reckoning, we end the year a more divided nation. And in 1998, we face the prospect of a race-based double dissolution which may make indigenous relations worse, a republic convention which comes up with no clear future model, further estrangement from Asia and a discussion of whether we should have multi-culturalism when the real discussion should be about what sort of multiculturalism.

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