

STATESMAN



BICENTENARY

It's my party and I'll cry if I want to

As most Australians prepare for an orgy of celebration of 200 years of white settlement, hundreds of thousands of Aborigines and a large and growing number of whites are questioning what there is to celebrate. The significance of the round number of elapsed years appears to be greater than any particular deed associated with 1988. DAVID LANGSAM reports

ALONG WITH THE search for national identity there is a whole range of problems, both practical and philosophic, facing Australia's 16 million people.

Clearly the most important thing is that there is to be no celebration of the 40,000 (possibly 200,000) years of Aboriginal settlement and until Australia comes to terms with its aboriginality, it is unlikely to resolve its identity crisis. Among other things the country also has to find an economic path to set its direction for the future.

The only single nation continent in the world has no national borders, is at the one time a working person's paradise, and at the same time is not living up to the hopes and aspirations of its large body of conscientious citizens.

In Australia's mixed economy, the rich become millionaires while one in five children lives below the poverty line. But before critics gloat at the exposé of the uppity colony, it should be made clear that few countries even aspire to the real level of equality in Australia, despite its shortcomings.

Above: two whites of British descent in Alice Springs. Now in the minority

Titles that artificially put children of inherited wealth and friends of the government above others have been abolished and will never return. Forelock tugging is not an Australian attribute. While governments in Britain and the United States dismantle welfare systems and attack trade unions, Australia's Labor government has built a national health service, trade union membership is above 50 per cent of the workforce and the union movement is a respectable, credible force. British secrecy is in stark contrast to the passage of Freedom of Information legislation in Australia. A public outcry ended the Hawke government's attempt to issue identity cards, but Hawke was first elected on his (fulfilled) promise to save Tasmanian wilderness from development.

But it is necessary to expose the hypocrisy of Australian egalitarianism. All mates under the sun, for all but 15 of the past 200 years the country had a White Australia Policy which excluded non-European migrants. The exclusion of Australia's

own people, the Aboriginals, remains the worst duplicity.

Next Tuesday night on ITV, journalist John Pilger will give breathtaking evidence of the destruction of the Aboriginals: "nigger hunts" in Queensland as recently as the 1960s, the rewriting of the history of massacres, protracted guerrilla wars by Aboriginal peoples, the rape of the women and the theft of their children.

Sydney-born Pilger says Australians have to give up the role of innocent bystanders. "Australia is not an innocent country," says Pilger. "It's a very guilty country and this year is the greatest opportunity to heal the wounds as it promised to do. The renege [of Prime Minister Bob Hawke's 1983 promise to right the wrongs of the past] is an historic betrayal."

Pilger says most Australians support Aboriginal Land Rights, but because of misleading headlines in the Murdoch-owned national newspaper *The Australian*, they don't know they are in the majority. He attacks the Hawke government for not countering the Murdoch claims. We shall return to Mr Hawke shortly.

Australia is no longer an inherently racist nation, although it was until very recently and pockets of entrenched bigotry remain, particularly in rural areas. Its racism was handed down by the British colonisers and has only been whittled away since the mass migration of non-British Europeans. While some migrants may hold prejudices, it is difficult to be explicitly racist in the world's most multicultural society. Racist and sexist epithets, while heard, are disapproved of socially.

Defining Australians

Last year, for the first time, non-British migrants and their descendants outnumbered British migrants and their descendants. Melbourne, the capital of Victoria, is the second largest Greek city in the world after Athens, and has twice as many Italians as Greeks. There is no longer any shame in being non-British as there was until 1972 when Gough Whitlam, the first Labor Prime Minister in 23 years, defined an Australian as "anyone who lives or works in Australia".

Australia's leading radical black activist, Gary Foley, born on a reserve in Northern New South Wales, says Melbourne is Australia's least racist city. Unfortunately, Victoria's progressive centre left Labor government does not run the whole country. The Premier, John Cain, leads a well-managed state with humane social policies. Yet in Victoria, where the government has held lengthy consultations, Aboriginals are still waiting for Land Rights.

On two specific parcels of land, at Cain's request, the Federal government last year used legislative powers given under a 1967 referendum to override the conservative, Liberal Party-dominated, State upper house, which was blocking the release of land.

That same power would have allowed either the previous Liberal Fraser or current Hawke governments similarly to intervene in Queensland or Western Australia, but they haven't — a litmus test which identifies the gulf between words and deeds of the Hawke government. Uniform national Land Rights legislation, with the right to veto mining and exploration, as well as

acknowledgement of Aboriginal prior ownership, *within* the constitution, are really the basic minima for beginning the long road to compensation for 200 years of murder, rape, persecution and pillage.

6 National Land Rights legislation, with a veto on mining and exploration, within the constitution are the minima for beginning the long road to compensation for 200 years of murder, rape, persecution and pillage

Aboriginal "reserves" were sited by the colonisers on the least arable land and the ensuing poverty and misery blamed on the victims. When mining companies discovered resources under the reserves, scant regard was given to the residents. Following the description of Aboriginals as "heathen" by Christian fundamentalist Hugh Morgan, head of the giant Western Mining company, the gifted columnist Patrick Cook drew a cartoon of two Aboriginals discussing the issue. One says to the other, "If he was a real Christian, he would have poisoned our flour years ago." It is heart-breakingly true.

With their economic and social base confiscated, Aboriginal society crumbled. Squatters slaughtered the native wildlife and cleared the land for grazing. When Aboriginals killed a sheep for food, they were either shot on the spot or tried under English law for stock theft and then hanged. White-introduced alcohol remains a major problem.

In Tasmania, the British rampaged across the island killing every Aborigine they found. Despite the death of Trucanini, the last full-blooded Tasmanian Aborigine, 112 years ago, about 2000 Aboriginals remain in Tasmania. In 1986 they were still waiting for funds for a burial place for their dead.

Aboriginal blood

Land Rights opponents use a Catch 22 argument based on the claimants' percentage of Aboriginal blood. If, they say, part-Aboriginals can be given territory that whites have to buy, what will stop whites claiming they are Aboriginals and getting property for free? In fact the claiming process requires a group claim from people recognised by the Aboriginal community as Aboriginals. And claiming to be an Aborigine in rural Australia is like boasting of being a Jew in Nazi Germany. But, say the white opponents magnanimously, if they really are full-bloods, then they can claim land. (After the last 200 years, there are not many eligible applicants.)

Prime Minister Hawke promised in 1983 to right the wrongs of the past. At the same time, he is highly attuned to the needs of industrialists and the business community, which generally opposes

Land Rights.

The former head of Australia's trade union movement, Hawke boasts of his friendship with a host of multi-millionaires, including Murdoch partner and transport mogul, Sir Peter Abeles, whose TNT lorries drove through Wapping picket lines. Hawke has been called Mr 78 Percent, the public opinion poll measure of his personal popularity at its 1983 peak. The rating has fluctuated, but in recent days has returned to near 60 per cent. If democracy is giving people what they want, then Hawke represents the aspirations of most Australians.

However, the entire left of the Labor Party (about 40 per cent of the membership) strongly disapproves of Hawke's sellouts on Aboriginals and uranium mining and his dumping of New Zealand over the ANZUS alliance.

The Labor left enters 1988 with mixed feelings — an active partner in a government that has been re-elected twice, ending the conservative claim to be the "natural" party of government.

In what could be a most inspired piece of machiavellian strategy, the leader of the left, Gerry Hand, a long-time campaigner for justice for Aboriginals, has been appointed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. The toughest portfolio, Aboriginal Affairs has broken each successive incumbent who has tried to effect change. Those who didn't even try are condemned by history.

In 1988 Australia is celebrating that history, so this is judgement year for Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs. It is the sort of job that will keep a noisy left-wing back bench well-occupied.

Hand has the support of the left and a degree of confidence from Aboriginals, but told the *New Statesman* that he could not promise legislation in 1988. "My job is to try to get people talking to each other, to get an understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and to reach a compact or a treaty. If you understand something clearly you are more likely to agree."

Asked directly if he will be the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs who implements uniform national land rights legislation with an Aboriginal veto over mining and exploration, Hand refuses to comment, obscurely saying, "We've got a few ideas."

He implies that much public relations has to be done before Australia is ready for the big step of admitting and correcting its past mistakes. Yet if Hand wants to sleep at night and retain leadership of the left, he needs to get a major score on the board.

When Aboriginal Australians are treated as equals in their own land and police officers no longer advocate genocide, Australians will have much to be proud of. The country's freedom, democracy and contempt for inefficient bureaucracy have contributed to laying the foundations for a robust and healthy nation. I fear Hand's reticence, but in the end it may be Hawke's ego that brings about land rights legislation.

Sensitive to world opinion, Hawke is going to take a battering at this birthday party. Gary Foley says Aboriginals will cause untold damage, not through violence, but through their very survival. "After the 26th [January], journalists are going to be looking for something else to report on," says Foley. "All we have to do then is show them where we live."