

Along the track

Australia Day: The Way We Are

I saw a whale not so long ago. She called in for a visit and a bit of a rest in Horseshoe Bay at Bermagui. What a calm and peaceful place to visit when you are travelling thousands of kilometres to get back home to Antarctica. I wonder how many times she has visited over these last decades and what kind of Australia is she visiting now, what changes has she seen?

There is much to be proud of about this great continent. The world's oldest continuous living culture has cared for this land for at least 65,000 years. Over these last two hundred years, millions of us have arrived here or been born here and we have come to call it home. It has been an extraordinary social experiment, if that's the right word, born of necessity as well as generosity at times when we welcomed refugees and others displaced for all sorts of reasons. It has been the envy of so many nations. We have not always lived in harmony with the first custodians of this land, despite the fact that we are beginning to appreciate that we have much to learn from them.

But today we live in turbulent times. Our lucky country is under strain from different quarters and even Nature herself is trying to tell us something. At one end of the country our paddocks are thirsty and at the other end, they are drowning. The blue skies we love in summer stay with us, not a cloud in sight, no steady, soaking rain from what Dorothea McKella called 'the pitiless blue sky.*' There are so many who are sick at heart as they watch their stock die and crops fail, when the floods and the fires take hold. It's happened before, some say and yes it has but not as often and not as severe.

Nature's call is not the only challenge we face at this time. The harmony that was once the envy of so many nations is beginning to fracture. What holds us together today, what are the foundations, the building blocks of our community, our nation? Where do we want to be in five, ten years?

The homeless and the hungry have it tough today. Their numbers are increasing but at least we don't call them dole bludgers or other names that put the blame on them. But we can do more. Are we still the home of mateship, the land of the fair go? We like to think so but have we become a nation of people who ask: "What's in it for me?" There have been times in our history where conflict and violence have scarred our way of life but that seems to be creeping back not just on our streets but the unrelenting number of incidents of domestic violence were unimaginable a decade or so ago. In times of disaster, when bushfires wreaked so much havoc and damage, when floods destroyed homes and livelihoods, Australians rose to the challenge.

Differences were set aside, sleeves rolled up and help was at hand. Those crises and catastrophes remind us of the need to co-operate, to show kindness (including to total strangers), to make personal sacrifices for the common good, and to pay renewed attention to our immediate local neighbourhood – especially those neighbours who may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of social isolation.

Hugh Mackay has been researching Australians and their attitudes for over sixty years. His books enhance any library and he has earned his place as one of the wisdom figures in Australia. In his latest book he suggests that we are undergoing a period of social isolation, we're busier than ever, we're more mobile than ever, but the fastest-growing household type is the single-person household. The information technology revolution makes us more 'connected' than ever before, but is also making it easier for us to stay apart, and to sacrifice too much face-to-face time in favour of screen time. It also seems to give permission for some to express their ideas and opinions in ways and in terms that they would not do face to face.

The last word to Mackay writes: We are born to connect, to co-operate and to show kindness towards each other, yet the social trends that have been reshaping us over the past 30 or 40 years have been pushing us in the opposite direction. Far from becoming more socially cohesive, we have actually been becoming more socially fragmented. Far from becoming more conscious of our interdependence and interconnectedness, we have become more defiant about our sense of independence, our individual differences, and our uniqueness. Revolutions never start at the top. If we dare to dream of a better world – a better society – a better neighbourhood – a place where people are kinder, more compassionate, more tolerant, more inclusive, more respectful, less cynical, less violent, then there's only one way to make it happen. If enough of us live as if it's that kind of society, that's the kind of society it will become.

The whale has left on its long journey home. I think we might have to make a journey too, and walk gently with others along the way!

From *My Country* by Dorothea Mackellar. 1904

Regards
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