

## Australian Social Values

Values are assumptions, convictions or beliefs that underpin and guide individual behaviour and attitudes, frame decision making and policy formation, and constitute the basis for ethics, aesthetics and morality. Over time, values may become 'formally rationalised' or solidified in laws, processes and institutions in society. Values may also be substantive principles, that is, abstract principles that exist in their own right. There are two categories of social values (1) traditional values and (2) values about the way we want the world to be (normative values).

Traditional values are the pre-existing, underlying principles and characteristics upon which societies are based. They may encompass universal or core values such as justice, truth and freedom. Political philosopher John Rawls has, for example, argued that justice is the first virtue that even the welfare of society cannot override. Interpretations of justice are, however, neither uniform nor agreed upon. One person's justice may be another person's injustice. There are also different evaluations of a society's past and its underlying values as evidenced by the 'history wars', the debate about colonisation of Australia and its impact on Indigenous people.

'Normative values', the way we want the world to be, are a mix of traditional values and values that we believe are necessary for a good society. This has been nicely expressed by Arjun Appadurai who observed that "culture is a dialogue between aspirations and sedimented traditions." There have been many attempts to define the common values upon which society should be based, but again, the interpretation of values can differ. Not only do people and societies have conflicts of values (as sociologist Max Weber argued) but behaviour is not necessarily consistent with stated or even deeply held values. Alternative values are regularly given different priorities in different situations and there are frequent trade-offs of values (e.g. individual gain may take precedence over the welfare of a community). Despite these problems, the search for shared values and debates about values are

significant because they help us to define more clearly what we think matters and what we aspire to as individuals and as a society.

### The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The search for common values has to be inclusive and fully engaging of a wide diversity of people. Following the conclusion of the Second World War, the United Nations conducted a series of deliberations about human rights to find ways in which the international community might better avoid atrocities such as genocide and other gross human rights violations. In December 1948, a Universal Declaration of Human Rights was unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (but with eight abstentions including the then entire Soviet bloc). The Universal Declaration is a good example of agreement about a common set of values. It was initially drafted by one hand, refined by many, debated at length by representatives from countries around the world and then unanimously adopted. Amongst its many provisions the Declaration covers: the right to life, liberty and security of person; the right to an education; the right to participate fully in cultural life; freedom from torture or cruel, inhumane treatment or punishment; freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and freedom of expression and opinion. Subsequently, several United Nations covenants were developed expanding the protection of human rights. Today the Declaration is the most widely translated document in the world. It is a bible of rights and values about a good society and the position of individual citizens within it.

### The debate about Australian societal values

The evolution of 'shared values' in Australia has been deeply influenced by many factors including the character of the Australian landscape, Indigenous history,

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colonisation, World Wars I and II, the Great Depression, immigration, multiculturalism, free trade, globalisation, the Iraq War and terrorism.

Prompted by tensions and issues between different ethnic groups in Australian society, former Prime Minister Howard and other ministers of his government made pronouncements about Australian societal values, namely that Australian values should not be optional and that people who do not share them could even be stripped of their citizenship. There were many commentaries in the opinion pages of major newspapers and from other media outlets at the time. This debate, however, begged many questions such as: What are Australian values? To what degree are they widely shared across the whole Australian community? Are Australian values distinctively different from those found in other societies?

## What values can we discern in past Australian society?

There are various interpretations of past Australian society as evidenced by the 'history wars' debate. There are, however, some common values that have a prominent place in narratives about Australian history. Some relate to place. This is most prominently so with Indigenous people and their special relationship with 'country' but also applies across the Australian population reflecting the uniqueness of Australia's climate, landforms, soils, plants and wildlife and the individual and collective experiences of an island continent with these distinctive characteristics. Others relate to shared history and social compacts and an idealised but nonetheless powerful and enduring vision of the past. They include 'mateship', 'the spirit of the Australian digger', 'egalitarianism' and 'a fair go' and are understood to apply regardless of age, socio-economic, educational or family background.

Many have argued that these values have not been translated into action, as evidenced by the treatment of Indigenous people in Australia. Reflecting on the achievements and failures of our past can, however, help us to adopt more inclusive social values including reconciliation, equality and justice for all Australians. Indigenous lawyer and academic Larissa Behrendt notes David Malouf's argument that "there is much to celebrate in (our) history which the recognition of historical truths that are unpalatable and shameful could not erase." Behrendt adds, "I've never understood the argument that acknowledging

the mistreatment of Aboriginal people and saying 'sorry' was a way of making Australians feel ashamed of their past."

On Wednesday 13th February 2008 the Rudd Government acted decisively to redress this wrong. In an historic occasion at the opening of the new Parliament there was an Indigenous Welcome to Country. Before Indigenous leaders and others who had gathered inside and outside the Parliament from around the country, Prime Minister Rudd made a full and eloquent apology to members of the Stolen Generation, together with commitments to deal with Indigenous disadvantage on a bipartisan basis.

## Where should we look for a statement of Australian societal values to guide us in the future?

In 2002, the Brotherhood of St Laurence commissioned a study to gain an improved understanding of Australian social values. Through focus group discussions and interviews, the study found that shared values included democracy, justice, caring for others, equality, a less selfish society, loyalty, and freedom of self-determination. In an earlier study in 1998, Valerie Braithwaite and Russell Blamey found that there was 95 per cent endorsement from Australian respondents for: human dignity, a world at peace, the rule of law, freedom, equal opportunity for all, and preserving the natural environment.

In 2000, the Australian Citizenship Council recommended, as part of a non-partisan Australian Bicentenary Compact, a declaration of Australian civic values. The Council proposed seven civic principles:

- To respect and care for the land we share;
- To maintain the rule of law and the ideal of equality under the law of all Australians;
- To strengthen Australia as a representative liberal democracy;
- To uphold the ideal of Australia as a tolerant and fair society;
- To recognise and celebrate Australia as an inclusive multicultural society;
- To continue to develop Australia as a society devoted to the wellbeing of its people; and

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- To value the unique status of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The mission statement of the former Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) spoke of a multicultural Australia “enriched through the entry and settlement of people; valuing its heritage, citizenship and cultural diversity; and recognising the special place of Indigenous people as its original inhabitants.” In *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity* (an updated report based on the 1999 *New Agenda for Multicultural Australia*) this statement was placed in a larger societal context:

The freedom of all Australians to express and share their cultural values is dependent on their abiding by mutual civic obligations. All Australians are expected to have an overriding loyalty to Australia and its people, and to respect the basic structures and principles underwriting our democratic society. These are the Constitution, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, English as the national language, the rule of law, acceptance and equality.

New Matilda, an online independent media magazine, has set down six collective values to define a civilized and decent Australia. These are: community engagement, equity, stewardship, fairness, freedom, and ethical culture.

In composite, these statements, together with the values underpinning the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (with which they share many common features), form a solid foundation for a set of values to guide Australia and its people into the future. Today many traditional values such as a fair go, a fair society and democratic rights and freedoms are significantly under threat. For these many reasons values need to figure prominently in debates about Australia’s future.

## Useful sources

Braithwaite, V., & Blamey, R. (1998). “Consensus, stability and meaning in abstract social values”, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 33(3), pp.363-380.

This article assesses how shared values are prioritised, comparing the responses from two different community samples over a 20-year period to examine the consensus and stability of Australian values.

Brotherhood of St Laurence (2002). *Values and Civic Behaviour in Australia*

<http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/valuesreport.pdf>

The National Engagement Project Trial commissioned by the Brotherhood of St Laurence was an investigation into the values of a cross-section of Australians.

Mackay, H. (1999). *Turning Point: Australians Choosing their Future*, Sydney: Pan Macmillan.

Hugh Mackay examines how Australian society and values are in a state of transition, analysing contemporary attitudes to politics, religion, sport, technology and work.

Phillips, T., & Smith, P. (2000). “What is Australian? Knowledge and attitudes among a gallery of contemporary Australians.” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 35(2), pp.203-224.

In their study of how Australians think about their nation, Phillips and Smith find that there is “remarkable homogeneity” among respondents when asked to identify common Australian values.

Apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples made by the Prime Minister on 13/2/08. [http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech\\_0073.cfm](http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0073.cfm)

Speech in reply by the Leader of the Opposition.

[http://www.liberal.org.au/info/news/detail/20080213\\_WearesorryAddresstoParliament.php](http://www.liberal.org.au/info/news/detail/20080213_WearesorryAddresstoParliament.php)

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