

## ASSIMILATION BLUES



I arrived in Australia in 1945 and could not speak a word of English. Upon disembarking from my mother's womb in a large house on the corner of Simpson and George streets, East Melbourne (after a pleasant nine-month journey), I began settling into my new homeland and quickly made the most of the numerous opportunities that lay at my fingertips. Warm milk, cosy blankets, windows full of sunshine, and all the wondrous smells, sights and sounds of a new land were available in abundance, and as far as can be remembered I was made to feel fairly welcome.

After a couple of years I had learnt to get about and was becoming fluent in the basic language. I had also made a few connections and was getting the lie of the land. Certainly there were various settling-in problems: lonely moments, inexplicable fears and various discomforts, nothing too serious. It was an agreeable enough experience – but assimilation in the new land was to be another matter.

I think it is safe to say that, in the business of becoming a mainstream Australian and happily sharing the alleged normality and common ways, I, like many others, have substantially failed. The truth is, I have resisted such assimilation with all my heart and soul.

From the outset I don't think I was very impressed with crowd behaviour in the new land, and I was often grateful at the end of each day that I was me and not them. As a child I was also probably too fascinated with myself, busy finding out ways of protecting and expressing and being me, without becoming too demoralised or exhausted in the strange and wild world in which I found myself.

This was my main hobby as a boy, and eventually it became my full-time job and lifetime's work, which I imagine will occupy me right through to the end.

The preservation of the precious, peculiar self usually requires a refusal to fully adapt or assimilate. My soul was the only genuine artwork and heirloom I had brought with me to the new land and I wanted to preserve it – I liked my lonely, happy little soul.

In the early years of boyhood I made a sincere effort to fit in with the crowd and observe the social customs, because that's what people seemed to be doing. I went to football matches, joined the boy scouts and endeavoured conscientiously to observe the sacredness of epic military battles. I even tried my hand at nationalism, loyalty to the Queen, schoolyard marching squads and competitive ballgames – although I remember there was considerable coercion and intimidation involved in getting certain boys to conform to such things.

I also submitted to various teachers and headmasters who encouraged assimilation by continuously clouting, thumping, shaming, belting and humiliating me in attempts to drum things in or out of young Michael, which would help him to achieve a successful, law-abiding and happy Aussie life. They were doing it for my own good and it all seemed perfectly normal. So began my deep suspicion about normality. But try as I would, I didn't care much for compliance or the ways of collective education – so much of it was boring and implausible.

I found other things far more interesting than schoolwork, such as making explosives, or looking down my microscope at dead flies for endless dreamy hours in my room, or scavenging in the rubbish tip. And working on my exhilarating, exclusive relationship with a small black-and-tan kelpie named Dinah, who by example and knowing looks conveyed to me the precious advice, 'unto thine own self be true'.

One day in 1954, amid a throbbing crowd, I saw my football

team win its only premiership, a victory that was so satisfying I never needed to follow football again – the quest had been happily completed for me at the appropriate age of nine and I was able to get on with my development unencumbered by an attachment to mass boofhead tribalism. I was lucky. I left the crowd, and my non-conformity began to blossom.

This failure to assimilate and be a fine fellow became vivid at the age of nineteen, when I was selected by the government press gang to be a soldier, designated to help in the slaughter of Vietnamese people in their own beautiful homeland – a prospect that seemed proper and normal to well-assimilated Australians at the time, but which to me seemed insane, outrageous and disgusting.

Naturally I rebelled, and when I presented myself at the local post-office counter to ask for a conscientious objector's form, the manager made a special trip from the back room to tell me that I was a coward and I should be ashamed of myself and get a proper, decent haircut.

It was generally understood that a proper haircut would save you from shame.

Oh, the embarrassment and shame of being yourself, the painful death of being known for who you really are, and the suicide of speaking your peculiar mind. Oh, to be mainstream like a politician.

The Australian Prime Minister and his treasurer, Mr Costello, have recently advised Muslim immigrants to assimilate and

accept Australian values. As a citizen, and one who after all these years and generations knows this land and its people affectionately and fairly well, I must reassure all such immigrants that assimilation is not only unnecessary, it might well be a miserable waste of time, if not absurdly impossible. Assimilation means you become like a regular Australian – and that could be a personal disaster, I can assure you. I also request that, if there is a Muslim immigrant out there who learns what these unique Australian values are, they please write me a letter and tell me, because I cannot find out what they are and the Prime Minister speaks only gooey, foolish and unintelligent words on the subject – like a wet, mushy romantic.

And perhaps that's just what he has become – the Prime Ministership in some respects being an outer region of La-La Land with a population of one. Mr Howard, disguised as Mr Normal, has steadily de-assimilated from the Australian culture. He gets about in Apache strike helicopters, shadowed by men with guns 24/7 – he can't walk down the street alone, can't go for a drive, do a bit of shopping or have a quiet meal in a café. If he did, something awful might happen. He can't speak freely. He has no basic liberties. No wonder he talks about the fight for freedom. Yet strangely, this remote and weirdly constricted life is what he has always wanted, has worked for and is clinging to so defiantly. And the Treasurer wants it too! Oh dear.

Muslim immigrants, new immigrants all, the greatest thing you can bring to this land and give to this culture is your soul.

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If you want to find the spirit of this country, take this soul, and your children's if you can, beyond the concrete cities and its politics, and find the natural world of the bush, for a little time at least. Wander there, sleep and feast and pray among the hills and the trees, as the glorious Afghan-Australians did in generations past; feel the bush and let it enter slowly into your peculiar sensibility. Do what the Prime Minister has done too little of in this land. You may not assimilate but you can be one of nature's divine creatures here, one of its many flowers and one of its brilliant gems. It waits for you.

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