

Lucky for some



In the national craving for wealth and security, too many Australians and their ideas have been left on the scrap heap.

BY DAVID WILLIAMSON

DONALD HORNE COINED THE EPITHET "the Lucky Country" in a spirit of disparagement, but his argument with his own country was centred on the question of whether we deserved to be as lucky as we undoubtedly are.

Even Horne could see we're more fortunate than most. We're not subject to the murderous whims of a dictator or a warlord. We have the freedom to build our lives within the framework of the law as we see fit. We can change a government we don't like, and we are free to construct our own moral framework outside the rigid formulations of any particular religion. We have a tricky, but reasonably benign climate and, given the enormous influx of people from other countries and cultures, we are relatively free of prejudice and discrimination.

We are also wealthy. Some of us enormously so, and here's where the national report card starts to look a little less than perfect. Recently *The Age* reported that ANU economist Andrew Leigh and Oxford's Sir Anthony Atkinson found that the wealthiest 1% of Australians now take 9% of national income, compared with 5% in 1980, and the share of the richest 10% is now higher than at any time since 1949.

Australia's press, whose ownership is concentrated

in fewer hands than anyone with a genuine concern for diversity of opinion would remotely deem healthy, saturates us with the kind of right-wing economic orthodoxy that suits the interests of its owners. Anyone who questions the growing divide between rich and poor is said to be indulging in the "politics of envy". We are told implicitly that the more inequality the better, as envy drives the economy at a faster pace and eventually everyone is better off.

Keeping up with Joneses, however, has other effects. It generates high levels of stress, which might explain why Australians report they are less happy than they were over 50 years ago despite being very much more wealthy in absolute terms. (See *International Gallup Poll, 1948; International Social Survey, 2002.*)

Furthermore, the theory that greater inequality makes the economy tick over faster has been conclusively disproved by the country our conservatives most love to hate, Sweden. In their eyes Sweden is a high-tax country in which incentive has been sapped and whose despair-ridden population are prone to topping themselves. In fact, Australians kill themselves at a far higher rate than the Swedes, and other comparisons are interesting.

Sweden has strong employment protection laws of the type that John Howard has just dispensed with.



JONESES-TOWN

The new suburbia on Sydney's western fringe – the perfect setting for a "life of barbecues, backyard cricket and rampant consumerism"

In Sweden, the richest 10% are six times richer than the poorest 10%, while our top 10% are more than 12 times as rich as the poorest 10%.

Despite this, Sweden's current growth rate of over 4% is healthier than ours and unemployment, at 5%, is the same. Their wealth per capita is almost identical to ours and their economic competitiveness is ranked third in the world and we're 19th. And the Swedes work far less hours per year to achieve these results than we do. Part of their success is that they invest four times as much as we do on social programs to enhance the productivity of their low-income earners, rather than throwing bucketloads of middle-class welfare to the already well-off.

Given the many studies which show that the larger the income disparity in any society, the less trust, the less community feeling and the higher the crime rate it experiences, it may just be that the Swedish national priorities have resulted in a country with similar economic outcomes, more leisure and significantly better social vibes than our priorities have led us to. I hope that if Kevin Rudd takes office as a result of the Howard government's ideologically driven workplace changes, he casts a longer eye on Sweden than John Howard ever would.

The lack of diversity in media ownership has also

All images by Andrew Merry from the exhibition *Aerial Photography of New Suburbia*.

The exhibition opens at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Fitzroy, Victoria, on Thursday January 25, 6-8pm, and runs from January 27 to March 10, 2007. For details, see www.ccp.org.au

unleashed unprecedented levels of venom directed at anyone who doesn't subscribe to the right-wing social and political agenda. Those Australians who are genuinely disturbed by growing social inequality, environmental degradation, global warming, the treatment of refugees, John Howard's subservience to George Bush, or the saturation levels of American culture we're subjected to, are derided. Those who attempt to suggest that a life of barbecues, backyard cricket, social complacency and rampant consumerism may not fully nourish the psyche are branded "elites" harbouring contempt for "ordinary" Australians.

The new national hero of the right is the "aspirational" Australian, with "aspiration" given a very narrow definition indeed.

THEN & NOW

SCHOOLS

1964

Government: 76%
Non-government: 24%
(of students)

2005

Government: 67%
Non-government: 33%



TANGLED WEB
Western Sydney's ever-expanding maze of freeways, arterial roads and overpasses bodes ill for the looming energy crisis

To be of the "soft left" is the cause of contemptuous derision from the prime minister down. The very name "soft left" would seem to indicate that the threat level is pretty minimal, but the triumphal ugliness of the Right has reached new heights.

I don't think any national newspaper in any democracy on Earth has ever printed an editorial statement as deeply anti-democratic and totalitarian as this gem from *The Australian*. "Until the writers and film-makers are prepared to shake themselves free of moral vanity, passengers on the good ship Australia will be increasingly disposed to hand them a paddle and pitch them overboard." Anyone for a little book burning?

Lack of tolerance for any alternative viewpoint has become so pronounced it's verging on laughable. A prominent right-wing columnist recently lamented the fact that there are not enough right-wing cartoonists. The reason, as was pointed out succinctly in a letter next day, was that savaging the underdog usually doesn't provoke loud guffaws, but presumably this is no defence in contemporary Australia, where "balance" is code for eliminating any faintly leftist views. Presumably our cartoonists should be tossed off the good ship Australia also.

To economic rationalists, Australian artists have no place on the good ship Australia in any case. Entertainment is just another free market international commodity and if the public prefers American product, then fine. And it is fine to a point. Australians should be free to get their entertainment where they like. But entertainment and art are generated on a playing field that's anything but level.

Despite the enormous disadvantage of infinitely smaller budgets and non-existent promotional budgets, Australian creators have often reached peaks of excellence that have helped us retain a sense of who we are and what we stand for, and our government's lukewarm support for the arts is another significant debit on the national ledger. In my play *Emerald City*, Colin the screenwriter says, "We need to know that we are important enough to have fictions written about us or we will always feel that real life happens somewhere else and is spoken in accents other than our own."

The much-touted success of the free-market American entertainment product ignores the fact that seven out of eight American movies lose money, and it's not hard to see why when you try and scan the video shelves for something you might like to take home. Shallow formulaic action flicks created by committee in LA predominate. And the values that many promote, that maximum force solves all problems, and that violence is sexy, are values many Australians don't condone.

The Right has also done as much as it can to weaken our public school system and by virtue of its deterioration cause as many children as possible to transfer to the private system, where they will be inculcated with "values", no doubt of the God-fearing right-wing type. When Mark Latham dared address the sheer immorality of shovelling federal money in the direction of hugely wealthy schools, it was virtually the end of his political career. The press bayed for blood at his effrontery in questioning "aspirational" Australia.

There have been many episodes in recent Australian political history that are little short of disgusting. The Tampa incident in which crack Australian troops were sent to deal with the supposed threat of 400 dehydrated and debilitated genuine refugees was one of them. The imprisonment of other genuine refugees behind barbed wire for lengths of time that reduced many to madness is another, yet to question these actions invites a deluge of vitriolic right-wing abuse of the kind that would have been unthinkable even 20 years ago.

Our government also tried to tell us that global warming was a left-wing fantasy until the evidence became so overwhelming that further denial constituted a political liability. Climate change shows every sign of being catastrophic in economic and human terms. And even if there were no greenhouse gas worries, the vistas of endless economic growth our government conjures are finally being recognised as illusory. The present consumer carnival our affluent are enjoying has been underwritten by fossil fuels which have been countless millions of years in the creation and are rapidly disappearing, and there's nothing on the horizon remotely as cheap and efficient.

The endearing belief of our economic gurus and right-wing commentators that "technology" will come galloping in to save the day is a view greeted with huge scepticism by the scientific community itself. There is no wonder technology on the horizon, or even beyond the horizon.

The opinion of most evolutionists is that mankind will have exited this planet an eye-blink of geological time into the future. Given our inability to come to terms with the looming energy crisis, the global warming crisis, or to transcend the virulent tribal affiliations which are presently fuelling the entry of near-psychotic nations into the nuclear club, we could well be talking of a human future of 500 years rather than 5 million. Other statesmen such as Tony Blair are starting to address the problems. Our government's attempts are late, limp, embarrassing and impractical. Their time horizon is clearly limited to the next election.

Yes, Donald, we are still ruled by second-rate men with limited agendas, and yes, our luck, underwritten by the vast energy and mineral reserves we are sitting on still holds, but I have eight grandchildren and fear for them all. ●

David Williamson is Australia's most successful playwright.

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