

Which Identity for Australians?

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Leading up to the Australia Davos Future Summit, some of Australia's best and brightest convened at Melbourne Business School for a two day workshop (February 14-15, 2006) on the futures of Australian identity.

Organized by Paul Hameister¹ of the Future Summit, hosted by Dr. Robert Burke of Mt Eliza Centre for Executive Education and facilitated by Professor Sohail Inayatullah, the workshop explored and developed scenarios of the futures of Australian identity.

Globalization, demographic changes, perceptions of loss of safety because of world terrorism, challenges to multiculturalism, demographic shifts, the possibility of pandemics, and dramatic new genomic, nano-technology, energy, surveillance, brain/mind technologies – all portend a disturbed world, a world in flux.

What will happen to Australian identity? Can it transform, will new identities emerge, asked participants?

The meeting began with a showing of investigative comic Akmal Salleh's (Compass, ABC TV) attempt to understand Australia day. His conclusion was

that Australia was in a process of becoming – tolerance, the laid back lifestyle, and different understandings of what it means to be Australian were the keys to identity sanity.

The workshop was structured around Inayatullah's² methodology of Mapping the past (through the method of shared history); Mapping the future (through the futures triangle); Disturbing the future (through emerging issues analysis), Deepening the future (through causal layered analysis); Creative alternatives (through scenario planning) and Transforming the future (through visioning and backcasting).

The futures triangle method laid the groundwork for the scenarios. This method is focused on three dimension of the future – the pull or image³ of the future; the push of the present (quantitative drivers) and the weight of history, the barriers to change.

Lucky country

The first image of identity that emerged was the "Lucky Country." Identity here was based on the past – on the agricultural

* He would like to thank Patricia Kelly and Jan Lee Martin for editing this article.

era. Resource riches have created this identity, for which the driving metaphor is, "She'll be right." However, participants questioned if "She" indeed will be right. They felt that Australia was selling "the family silver" and that with policies that have not been gracious toward others (refugees, the weakest in society) participants felt that luck may be running out. Moreover, this identity was overly passive, relying on what nature had given Australia, not what Australians could individually and collectively do to create a new future, a new identity.

Renewed past

The second image was that of the "Renewed Past." This was based on today's leaders looking back at the 1950s as the ideal era. Anzac parades, identity linked to Mother England, strong male values were crucial here. Of course, as we continue to the future, the identity would be renewed through technology, but the white picket fence will remain. Nostalgia for the past, strong moral values and male leaders are pivotal to this future.

Participants did not think this uni-cultural image could lead Australia, as women had too many barriers to achieve full equity in this future. It required more than renewing the past. Moreover, this image was closer to the hearts of the veteran demographic groups and some baby boomers than these more youthful leaders.

Theme park

The past is powerful resource.

The third image was that of Australia theme parks. Identity here was disparate, fossilized yet respectful of multicultural Australia, but it is not dynamic. Each theme park, in this future, represents the many cultures that are Australia. Each theme park is used to bring in tourists from around the world. In this future, culture is the big seller, culture is the winner.

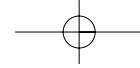
There was also discomfort in this "Culture" for sale future. While media companies would do amazingly well in the postmodern future, participants were unsure if the image of the "Croc hunter", among other potentialities, was the desired future.

"Lucky country", "Renewed past" and "Theme park" were all past-based, focused on preserving rather than creating anew. They were also exclusive, attempting to protect in some way past traditions (resources, relationship to England, patriarchy and culture itself).

Contrasting futures were "Innovative Oz", "Glocal", and "No identity".

Innovative oz

"Innovative oz" was certainly the preferred. The image was that of the boxing kangaroo, having the capacity to meet any adversity. Indeed, it is adversity that brings out the best in Australians – they come together, they invent, they innovate and create a new future. Global travel, early adoption of technology and social experimentation were all attributes of this future. Gender equity, embracing the ways of knowing of other cul-



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tures are all attributes that help Australia stay innovative. Culture enhances science and technology, synergizing to create a unique country and people. Identity is both tough – the nerves of steel as exhibited by female and male sports heroes – and soft, open to others, desiring to learn from all so as to be best one can be.

Glocal

Does this future go far enough, questioned some participants? They imagined an alternative future, that of the "Enlightened Australian" living in a Global and Local world. National identity was softer and duty to the planet and the locale stronger. The nation-state and states themselves were less important. Identity was Gaian, linked to the planet as a whole and one's locale. The cultural creatives demographic group are the drivers for this future. Sustainability, spiritual values, global governance were the key values in this gentler future. Indigenous culture and spirituality was not external to identity but embraced at deep levels. Innovation emerges not just from science and technology but from ethics and integrity, from leadership doing the right thing (and thus keeping the luck-karma continuing).

But what would happen to those focused on the past, who need stability? How would they manage in this changing future? Would social cohesion be possible if localities began to use identity as a weapon against each other? Clearly, this future would only be possible if there were superordinate rules setting up how localities organized in

this global in becoming.

No Aussie identity

The question of all identities feeling at home in a rapidly changing world was even more salient in the last future – "No Aussie identity". Because of true globalization (movement of capital, goods, services and labour) national barriers break down. Identity can be with one's transnational corporation or with one's religion (the global ummah, for muslims, for example), with one's website (as in Asiagroove.com) or with some other main identity.

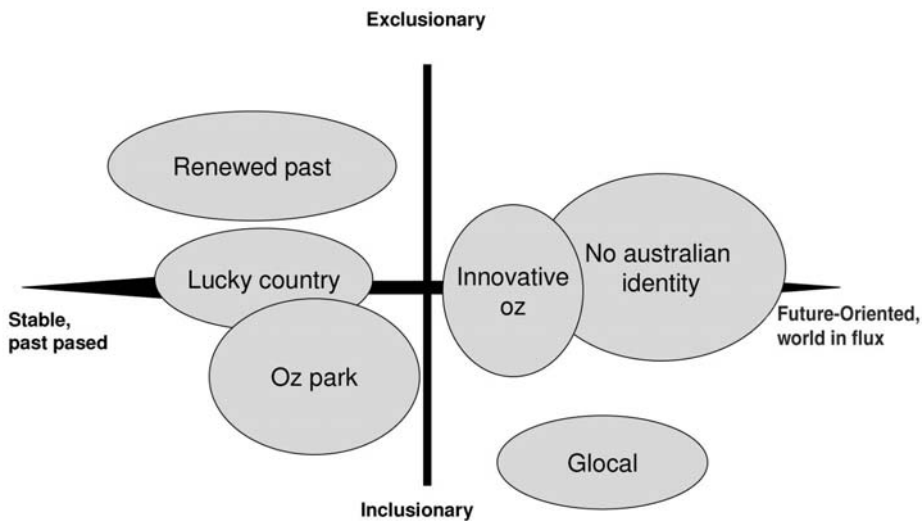
This future, while embraced by a few participants, was disturbing for others. While they found the "glocal" self inspired and working for the collective, this new self was still considered selfish, putting self, company, religion, web community before nation. Those wedded to the past – lucky country and renewed past – would especially find this threatening. The sacrifices made in the last hundred years would amount to nothing, it was felt.

These images of the future were then tested using a range of different methods – emerging issues analysis to discern how new technologies might change these futures. The double-variable scenario method was used to test if new futures would emerge. This method used inclusion and exclusion on one axis and stable and disturbed on the other axis. The images fitted well into this analysis. Lucky country and renewed past were based on stable exclusionary worlds. Glocal was inclusionary and future oriented. Innovative Oz was based on future

orientation but there would be some clear winners (the emerging knowledge economy and those who could adapt, whose identity was less rigid) and losers (those who yearned for the "gold old days".) The theme park future was past oriented and inclu-

sionary, as all cultures were part of Australia, but in a ossified way. "No Australian identity" was extreme – inclusionary to those who could make the shift but excluding those who held on to the nation-state.

Australian identity futures



The preferred

Participants voted on their preferred future – the loading was strong toward Innovative Oz and Glocal. Both involve the current identity to use the past – stories of meeting adversity as well as the values of respect for nature, respect for others – to create new futures. While the first creates the enlightened Australian, the second creates the enlightened global and local citizen.

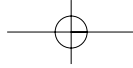
Which future will become reality? Participants believed that any of these six futures was plausible,

which one becomes the actual reality is based on many factors, including which futures we decide to make come true. Next is to road test these identities scenarios, asking others what is missing, what is plausible.

But most important is what is preferred. Which is your preferred future?

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Notes

1. Along with Hameister, Burke and Inayatullah, there were Dorgee Sun, Alicia White, Jeremy Cox, George Catsi, Simon Illingworth, and Darren Saffin.
2. See Sohail Inayatullah, *Questioning the Future*. Tamsui, Tamkang University Press, 2005.
3. The images function as alternative futures, and then are tested through other methods to discern if they should become full fledged scenarios.

