
THE AUSTRALIAN

Modern Australia's success is built on enterprise and hard work

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM January 26, 2018

With the politics of envy in full swing, it is worth remembering that the millions who came to these shores since the First Fleet arrived 230 years ago were driven not by the prospect of living at other people's expense but by the aspiration to forge a better life for themselves and their children.

Of course the convicts the First Fleet transported scarcely came by choice. But that didn't deter them from seizing the opportunities a new land opened.

By 1819, "emancipists", as former convicts were called, dominated Sydney's commerce, with the trio of Henry Kable, Simeon Lord and James Underwood successfully battling the East India Company's monopoly over Britain's trade with Asia to establish thriving routes for the colony's exports and imports.

That entrepreneurial flair never abated, any more than did the sense that Australia was a country that, above all else, rewarded effort and ability.

As Charles Dickens, who convinced his sons Alfred and Edward to migrate to NSW, put it, this was a place where "no man who is willing to work hard (but that he must be, or he had best not go there) can ever know want".

Far from being denigrated, enrichment was regarded as the foremost sign of success. It was therefore no accident that the colony's emancipists, in petitioning the King in 1820 for the right to trial by jury, vaunted the "thirty years of Industry" by which they had "not undeservedly arisen (to) Wealth, Character and Rank".

That proved a persistent refrain, with the Victorian commentator James Moloney noting in the 1880s that "wealth was properly an object of respect here because it was the main feature to denote a man's success in his efforts to advance".

The search for prosperity was, after all, why the settlers made the daunting journey; and if they achieved their goal, it was thanks not to noble descent or patronage, as was so often the case in England, but to incessant toil and commercial acumen.

Moreover, it was widely accepted that their success in unlocking the country's resources underpinned what James Moorhouse, the distinguished Anglican bishop of Melbourne from 1877 to 1886, famously called "a paradise for working men" where meat consumption, even for the families of labourers, was three times Britain's, four times Germany's and 10 times Italy's.

It would be easy to think that respect for ambition dwindled as the country matured. But as well as ignoring the record of outstanding enterprise in agriculture and mining, that contradicts the findings of successive surveys.

Ingeniously combining questionnaires with the analysis of textbooks and examinations, Harvard's David McClelland, who pioneered quantitative social psychology, showed the "achievement orientation" of young Australians in 1925 and 1950 at least equalled that in the US, placing them far above their counterparts in Canada, New Zealand and Britain.

Additionally, as a series of international studies on "belief in a just world" found, Australians remained convinced that it was primarily talent, rather than birth, luck or connections, that determined how well one did in life.

As a result, the merits of redistribution were never accepted uncritically. On the contrary, even in the late 1980s, the Canadian - political scientists Neil Nevitte and Roger Gibbins concluded, in one of the most careful of the international studies, that young Australians entering tertiary education placed substantially less value on the goal of equality of outcomes than young people in any of the other English-speaking countries.

None of that implies the culture of achievement lacked critics. From the earliest days of European settlement, there were those, such as the prominent pastoralist James Macarthur, who accused the newly rich emancipists of being grasping and uncouth, so that allowing them any influence would deter "the emigration of industrious and respectable families of the labouring and middle classes".

Charges of vulgarity soon became the battle cry of the country's literati, who contrasted the alleged philistinism of affluent Australians with the high culture of the English aristocracy.

At the same time, as the labour movement developed, the rhetoric of levelling acquired a loud and increasingly strident edge, - exemplified, however sardonically, in Henry Lawson's prophecy that:

The curse of class distinctions from our shoulders shall be hurled,

An' the sense of Human Kinship revolutionise the world;

There'll be higher education for the toilin', starvin' clown,

An' the rich an' educated shall be educated down.

Importantly, especially after World War 11, those two strands of criticism merged as a cultural elite emerged that viewed wealth and enterprise as both crass and unjust.

No one expressed that elite's outlook more influentially than the writer Vance Palmer, whose jeremiads excoriating a country "full of men and women intent on nothing but buying and selling" helped set the tone that still pervades the ABC.

At least initially, however, those claims faced powerful opposition. Calling on "the forgotten people" who did not want to live "spineless and effortless on an all-powerful state", Robert Menzies launched an unrelenting attack on those who sought "to discourage ambition, to envy success, to hate achieved superiority".

Taking aim at Labor's pledges of economic security, Menzies mocked the belief that Australians could thrive by "sitting at home huddling about ourselves the garments of mere safety". Rather, "development is the result of initiative; of risk-taking; of - ambition".

It is that voice that has weakened, if not entirely disappeared, in recent years. But the promise of Australia remains every bit as vast as it was when the First Fleet landed. Two hundred and thirty years later, what more fitting tribute to it and its successors could there be than a renewed commitment to the virtues of initiative, ambition and aspiration that, on so unpromising a foundation, built a country that shines in the world?

