

## One nation, many cultures

*Matthew Albert & Samah Hadid*

**DURING** his speech at the bushfire memorial service, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd spoke about distinctively Australian displays of courage, compassion and "steely resilience". All these virtues and many others were indeed on show. When it comes to describing the national ethos, such references are safe territory and undoubtedly true.

The same cannot be said for describing our national identity. It is time for the Australian national self-image to fit better with our national profile. A refreshed Australian identity would encompass many cultures and diverse lifestyles. Australia needs an identity that the world recognises as being global, and therefore, like the world, multicultural. The new identity will make our diversity a high-profile asset. We need an identity of a chameleon nation.

Second-generation migrants, first-generation Australians, "minority" young people (and the labels go on) like us, have been considered by conventional wisdom to be prone to identity crises. But with minorities making up the majority, maybe it's the nation's identity that is in crisis.

For us, the Australian B3 (beaches, blondes, barbecues) never truly made sense. Not for our sense of Australia anyway. The streets we live in are not like Ramsay Street or Summer Bay. Our nation is made up of different languages and of rich cultural and religious diversity. For this reason, it is perplexing that our projection of Australian identity is built around stories that still have Paul Hogan-like Australians at their centre.

Imagine an Australia where we did not project an image that most of us do not see in the mirror, but one that embraces who we are.

Our homes, in Maribyrnong and Bankstown respectively, reflect the sense of multiculturalism that is felt and driven by people in our communities.

With 23.9 per cent of our population born overseas, Australia is home to people who speak more than 300 languages. It is a microcosm of the world itself. Australia can make better use of this. Our national identity should be built around this Australian identity.

There are many initiatives aimed at embracing our cultural diversity and attempting to address cultural, racial and religious intolerance. Two days after Australia Day 2009, the Federal Government introduced the Diverse Australia program. This resulted from a review that pointed to the need for government programs to promote cultural diversity to broader audiences.

On Monday, the Human Rights Commission launched a discussion paper aimed at identifying the major issues faced by African Australians. Race Discrimination Commissioner Tom Calma noted that "even though Australians pride themselves in giving everyone 'a fair go', it would appear that many African Australians have not been fully given this chance". These are steps in the right direction.

But our national identity needs to become similarly inclusive in its terms, not least because mixing with people from different cultural and religious groups is part and parcel of our fair dinkum Australian experience.

Culturally diverse societies are able to adapt more successfully to rapid global changes, including increasing global population mobility. Australia is increasingly becoming part of

a global community. In the same way that G20 finance ministers and Central Bank governors committed themselves last Saturday to tackle national financial security by rejecting protectionism, so too should we reject protectionism concerning our national identity "security", which tends now to reflect a cliché.

Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds have contributed to Australia's entrepreneurial skills, bolstering our country's ability to trade and interact with other nations. Migrants have thereby contributed to Australia's economy and significantly broadened business opportunities. The line of business builders from Belarusian-born Sidney Myer to Czech-born Frank Lowy attests to this. This will continue. And, it should be at the centre of our national self-image.

Metaphors of the past will not suffice for a changing future. Australia should move away from aiming to be a melting pot or a mosaic. It should be, what we call, a chameleon nation. A chameleon nation adapts to fit in with its context.

It is a nation that draws on the full spectrum of its diversity to respond holistically and intelligently to global change. The chameleon nation we envision draws on, and builds all the differences it contains to ensure that Australia is a nation of the world and continues to contain the world within our nation. Our chameleon spirit can be manifested in the way we welcome migrants and refugees, and the way we accept changing demographics.

The chameleon spirit could make Australia's community of globally literate people its greatest asset and its multiculturalism a brand to sell on the global market. Our multiculturalism could be our marketing pitch, one to allow Australia to better adapt to emerging situations internally and externally, economically and socially.

Symbols also matter. Australia's diverse ethnicities and lifestyles need to be reflected in our national symbols.

Harmony Day this Saturday provides an opportunity to showcase the asset and the value that diversity can bring to Australia. It is a day in which we demonstrate cohesion and inclusion, without limiting such demonstrations to times when we need to respond to bigotry.

In the future, we imagine an Australia that accepts and celebrates its demographic reality, a chameleon nation that tells itself, through its national identity, that it is diverse, and proudly so.

*Matthew Albert is the founder of the SAIL (Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning) Program and is completing a masters degree in international law and relations at Oxford University. Samah Hadid sits on the Council for Youth and is co-founder of the non-profit community magazine Reflections.*

This article was published in The Age on 17 March 2009 at:

<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/one-nation-many-cultures-20090317-911y.html?page=-1>