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AUSTRALIA: A NATION OF LOTUS-EATERS

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If 1968 was the year that shook "the world," its vibrations took some time to reach Australia. That year began, for us, in a state of shock over the accidental drowning of our prime minister, Harold Holt. His assessment of our mood, delivered shortly before his death, was that we were a nation of lotus-eaters—hedonistic, materialistic, and lazy. That was an echo of the 1964 verdict passed on us by one of our leading public intellectuals, Donald Horne, in his seminal book, *The Lucky Country*, in which he suggested that Australia was a "country run mainly by second-rate people who share its luck. It lives on other people's ideas and, although its ordinary people are adaptable, most of its leaders (in all fields) so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise." Though he changed his mind about us as we began to reinvent ourselves through the 1980s and '90s, Horne had concluded in 1964 that Australia had "not deserved its good fortune."

Back then, Europe seemed far more remote from us than it does today, though most of us claimed European ancestry and recognized the Northern Hemisphere as the reference point for many of our ideas, beliefs, cultural imperatives, fashions, fads, and philosophies. In 1968, our hallmarks were complacency rather than angst; contentment rather than restlessness; optimism rather than dread. Other people's problems were not ours; other societies' upheavals were no harbinger of our own. Our revolutionary spirit was dormant and would remain so, for most of us, until well into the 1970s.

Alarmed but not engaged

Accustomed to the idea that the rest of the world was a long way away, we heard about the student riots in Paris, the strikes sweeping France, the brave resistance of young Czechs to the Soviet tanks rolling into Prague, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy in the US, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, and the upsurge in the Women's Liberation movement. We were intrigued, saddened, even alarmed—but not really engaged.

The country was experiencing a phase of political stability, with conservative governments in power at the national level and in five of our six states. The economy was healthy; unemployment was

low. The birthrate had begun to fall after the postwar baby boom, the divorce rate was miniscule, and the prospect of a prosperous, egalitarian society seemed to be coming true in the burgeoning middle-class suburbs sprawling out from our major cities. Our self-confidence was boosted by the sporting triumphs of Australians on the world stage.

Signs of a mounting resistance

While there were signs of mounting resistance to Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War—partly because so many of the troops were conscripts, that is, youths serving their compulsory military service—the majority of Australians, in 1968, still supported Australia's participation in what they had been led to believe was a straightforward struggle against communism. The newly amended National Service Act provided for imprisonment of those who resisted conscription, and a prominent Sydney journalist and pacifist, Simon Townsend, attracted widespread publicity when he was compulsorily enlisted and put on a diet of bread and water for disobeying his first military order.

Protest in London before the Australia House against Australian troops in Vietnam, Jan. 1966.

But an equally prominent young Australian, the rock star Normie Rowe, was widely praised for embracing his call-up. While many Australians in 1968 believed the US strategy in Vietnam was flawed, it would be two more years before a serious mass movement—the Vietnam Moratorium marches—would begin to erode popular and political support for the war.

It was not until 1972 that serious political and social change began to transform Australia. The Whitlam Labor government, elected in that year, brought Australia's involvement in Vietnam to an

end, opened a new dialogue with China, introduced free university education, and, in 1975, reformed the divorce laws, removing the concept of "fault" and establishing "irretrievable breakdown of marriage" as the sole grounds for divorce.

During three turbulent years that ended in the dismissal of the Whitlam government by the vice-regal governor-general, Australians became more politically engaged and more open to the idea of reform. As a society, we seemed eager to embrace social and cultural change, having finally begun to pick up the signals from the rest of the world, suggesting that political and cultural change was not just "in the air" but on the ground. Even so, few of us had any idea how radical those changes might turn out to be, or how fundamentally Australian society would be recast as we, too, caught the revolutionary mood.

The mid-1970s found us on the cusp of a series of four revolutions that would, over the ensuing twenty years, effectively reinvent us as a society. The *gender* revolution would fundamentally alter the place of women in our society and redefine the character of relations between the sexes everywhere from marriage to the workplace. The *economic* revolution would change our perspective on the world, bringing Southeast Asia into focus as never before and forcing us to recognize that our traditional ties to Britain and Europe were loosening. It would also challenge our fondly held belief in job security as our birthright and begin a process of wealth redistribution that would see a huge growth in the number of rich Australians, a shrinking of the economic middle class, and a widening gap between wealth and poverty.

The early 1970s also began a revolution in our sense of *cultural identity*, with the concept of multiculturalism being tentatively promoted, along with the idea that it was our ethnic and cultural diversity—rather than our Anglo-Celtic heritage—that would soon define us. The *information technology* revolution was, similarly, destined to change the way we live and work, but it would be another twenty years before we fully appreciated the impact of the emerging electronic technologies on the character of our society.

Women's Liberation Movement

Of all the changes that would reshape us, the gender revolution was by far the most radical. By 1970, the shock waves from the Women's

Liberation Movement were finally beginning to be felt here on a large enough scale for us (especially men) to realize that this was indeed a mass movement with revolution in its sights. Many Australian women had read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, but it was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* that gave a voice to a generation of women who became the local pioneers of Women's Lib. Friedan's 1963 classic had inspired many women to ponder their long history of second-class status in Australia, but there were few hints, until well into the 1970s, that Australia was about to embark on the long and painful journey towards sexual equality and, in the process, redefine the institutions of marriage and the family, revolutionize the workplace and redraw the political landscape.

In 1970, the Australian publication of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* added the fuel of anger and outrage to the revolutionary fire. By the late 1970s, the gender revolution was in full swing, aided by the Whitlam government's reform of the divorce laws in 1975 that sent the divorce rate to unprecedented levels. In the ensuing 30 years, Australia joined the high-divorce societies of the world, with between 35 and 40 percent of contemporary marriages now expected to end in divorce.

Falling marriage and birthrates

Along the way, our birth rate plummeted to a record low—partly driven by the rising education levels of women, partly by widespread acceptance of the contraceptive pill, and partly by the attitudes of a new generation of young Australians. These children of the revolution, now adults, appear to be determined to keep their options open and to postpone (or avoid) both marriage and parenthood in unprecedented numbers.

The falling marriage and birth rates and the sustained high rate of divorce rapidly reduced the size of the Australian household. Today, just over 50 percent of all Australian households are either single or two-person households, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics projects that by 2026, 34 percent of all Australian households will be single households. In the past twenty years, the number of Australians living in traditional family households (with a mother, father, and children) has fallen from 60 percent to 50 percent of the population, and is projected to fall to 40 percent in the next 20 years.

Changes in cultural life

The mood that favored change might have been slow to reach Australia, but our cultural life has been transformed in the period since the early 1970s. We've absorbed immigrants from about 180 countries around the world—still predominantly European, though with a growing proportion from East Asia, especially China—and we've also come to see ourselves as part of the Asia Pacific rather than a mere outpost of the UK. Our religious life has been marked by a steady decline in church attendance, the emergence of Roman Catholics as the dominant religious group, and the recent rise of fundamentalism and Pentecostalism. The sectarian bitterness of the past has all but disappeared.

Our revolutionary period might have been gentler and less traumatic than in many other parts of the world, but we, too, have our epidemics of depression and anxiety to show for it. Above all, we no longer feel as remote from the rest of the world as we once did. Our long era of complacency is over.

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