David Malouf

We sometimes assume that only in new societies, settler nations like Canada and Australia, is identity a matter of question and doubt. In fact these questions also arise in older places. I'm thinking of the united Germany and how, on a daily basis, whenever rights are under consideration or laws made, or an historic monument is to be restored or a bit of waste ground built on, there is always the need to take account of recent history; not in order to rewrite it — quite the contrary — but to see that the new thing continues some aspects of the past and makes a break with others.

Nations that have suffered defeat and occupation or have condoned or been the victim of tyranny, or of civil war or violent social division — England after 1649, the US after its civil war, more recently Chile, South Africa, Lebanon, Cambodia, ex-Yugoslavia and many more — have in the re-establishment of civil order within a unified and bonded nation to face bitter questions about crimes committed and rights violated before they can be reconstituted as ventures with a foreseeable future.

Australia too, I might just say, has a problem, still unresolved, with history and the need for reconciliation. Unlike Canada, we did not recognise prior occupation of the continent by indigenous people. Until very recently, we considered it, before we arrived, to have been *terra nullius*, no man's land. We signed no treaties with native peoples, and till 1967, when a referendum settled the question, did not count them in the federated nation. They were, in 1901 when we drew up our Constitution, no more than an unhappy remnant. Their only chance at a life within the nation was to assimilate or get lost.

But with this admittedly shameful exception, our nation, like yours, does not have a past of violent disruption, of civil war or revolution or tyranny to deal with. Questions of identity in new countries such as ours are about who we are and what we are for, have to do with beginnings and ends. With the kind of worlds we have made through the give and take of daily intercourse, but even more through inventiveness and imagination, that might offer us a security and range of opportunities that are not common elsewhere.

Of course the particular condition out of which the two places grew were unique, as they always are. What we now call Canada and Australia had different beginnings.

You began as a series of isolated settlements and trading posts in a vast wilderness that became, over centuries and by agreement, a tripartite nation, British, French, native.

We began nearly three hundred years later, as a purely British venture and a planned one: a product of the English and Scottish Enlightenment.

Despite these large differences, we are at this point remarkably alike. Federations that share the same goals and values, the same responsibilities one to another as members of a society devoted to the public good. We have two of the oldest and most stable government systems in the world and legal systems so close that decisions in your courts are frequently referred to as precedents in ours. We also have similar views about where we stand in the world: our responsibility as middle-sized but rich nations towards those out there in a complex world (and in our case they are close neighbours) who might need our aid or protection.

So then, what sort of nations and countries — since nation and country are not quite the same? What values and how did we establish them? To what extent have they been achieved? And how, in the world as it now is, are we to extend and preserve them?

We are places, I would want to say first, whose great work is to comprehend, which really means imagine, the land we occupy. To take it in. First as a landmass — much of which, desert in our case, ice in yours, is very nearly blank, though not in the minds of native people — then to hold it in our mind as a place fully occupied and inhabited: so fully that all the events and accidents of our experience in it, all the acts of conscience, somehow persist as accumulated lived life to enrich and layer the present and give it depth.

I am speaking now of our kind of history. Which is not one of great men or heroes — we are very little concerned with those — but of experience and the density of living: of work done, houses and cities built, many small lives lived that made their own small mark. A country imagined but also held in the memory, remembered: and in

this way carried forward as a present reality to be dealt with and drawn on, but also loved.

This is the work of a particular kind of country. One created by settlers who have first to discover it on the globe and then in their consciousness: one, in our case, and in yours, that was already possessed and fully imagined and inhabited before we came to it, so that as well as the form we have conceived for it there exists an older and parallel one that is haunting, mysterious, and perhaps finally unknowable to us, but is also an assurance, if we needed one, that the work can be done.

Australians took a long time to recognise this as the real work of settlement. Till our country, in 1942 was in imminent danger of being taken from us. On February 24, 1942, 13000 of our men, two whole divisions, went into captivity at Singapore; four days later Darwin was bombed and over 300 killed; the Japanese were in East Timor. We saw then, and for the first time most of us, what it might be that we had taken custody of, and had to ask ourselves what we had made of it that was worth the preserving; whether in fact it was really ours. It was the moment, perhaps, when we learned to see at last how native peoples possessed it and what we might have to learn from their experience: how to possess the place inwardly, and so subtly, so much as part of our life-blood that even if the land was stolen from us we could not be dispossessed.

So then, beginnings.

Precisely where the venture we call Canada began must be almost impossible to determine; like deciding at what point all the sources and little tributary streams of a river come together to make a single course that can be identified and named.

One significant moment, no doubt, was when the two men who give their names to this lecture series, Lafontaine and Baldwin, bringing with them their people, their language groups and the experience they represented, made common cause to win responsible government.

Equally decisive was the reaction of the Lafontaine-Baldwin administration to the burning of Parliament in 1848.

The very year, 1848, offers a dozen examples across Europe of how violent challenge to authority might have been met. Your authorities chose to go against conventional wisdom and practice, and by a bold act of imagination and faith in the people lay down a new law. In this place violence will not be met with violence because authority here is to be founded on something other than force. Let's see how *that* works, since we know already that the other does not. What was being established was the temper of a new world — one different not only from Europe but from also, as would soon be demonstrated, from the United States.

The beginning in our case is easier to establish. It has an hour and a day: the evening of January 26th 1788, when the male convicts of the First Fleet and their marine guards came ashore — the women would remain at Botany Bay for another ten days or so — the Union Jack was raised, and the King's health drunk. The argument in our case is what it was exactly that was being founded: a penal colony under naval administration and within the control of the East India Company to take the overflow of English jails, or — as seems more likely considering the huge cost, at £65 per convict — a naval station to supply a new and faster route to India and to be a watchful presence in the South Pacific against the French.

Either way, the notion was to create a transported version of the motherland where men and women who had been delinquent in one hemisphere, and in their first life, would be remade as good citizens in another. An Enlightenment experiment in the reformation of criminals and the creation, on the dark side of the planet, of a new Britain where the darkness would be illuminated by British know-how, Protestant order and decency, and the law.

A risky venture, but one that worked — though only just. The conditions were harsher than expected, the climate and seedtimes were unpredictable, the natives did not practice agriculture and could not help. What was essential to the experiment was adaptability, resourcefulness, and since old rules, old habits and traditions were useless in the place, a devotion to the principle of 'whatever works' — all qualities that were highly developed in the practiced criminals who made up the majority of the new inhabitants, but were also qualities of the peculiar Anglo-Saxon 'turn of mind'.

It was the particularities of the place itself that determined what must be done — and in response to them, and in interaction with the contingencies they threw up, this very particular society, which quite soon in no way resembled the one it was supposed to mirror 'at home'.

This was a complex and diverse society, as all societies are, divided by tensions that were local and particular. Think of your own world here in the first half of the nineteenth century, out of which some kind of non-violent civil society had to emerge from the conflicting views of reformists like Baldwin and Lafontaine, the Chateau Clique, merchants, railway barons, loyalist Orange Lodges that were anti-American, anti-Catholic, anti-French.

The tensions in Australia were of their own kind. Between the native born and the immigrants; between free settlers and emancipists, that is, convicts who had completed their sentence and now wanted the right to serve on juries and stand for elected office; Catholics, largely Irish, and Protestants who were also divided between Anglicans and non-Conformists; and between big landowners, 'squatters', on the one hand, who saw themselves as an emergent aristocracy and smallholders and city workers on the other. Because even convicts had from the start been granted Crown land — fifty acres to a man on a completion of his sentence, thirty to his wife and to each child — land in Australia represented currency and the surest way to respectability and status.

As a child of Empire, my vision of Canada — Our Lady of the Snows, Kipling called it in one of his imperial odes — derived from the tales of the rugged outdoors I read in Boys Own Annuals and form an advertisement on Australian radio. Out of a roaring blizzard came a voice intoning: for coughs and colds, do as the Mounties do in the frozen wastes of the Canadian North. Take Buckley's Canadiol Mixture.

But myths and stereotypes apart, our experience of space, our need to accept that there are areas within the worlds we inhabit that must remain forever beyond knowledge or control, has profoundly affected our view of Nature and our place in it. In ways, too, that are essentially un-European.

For us nature does not offer that comfortable reassurance of human centrality and power that in Europe comes, quite literally, with the territory. At worst hostile, at best

indifferent, it does not offer us moral consolation or make itself available as a mirror of human existence: there are no sermons in these stones. What it does is raise questions about what necessary place we humans might have in a world that exists quite well on its own and which has in the end no need of us. Now there's a challenge! To recognise and accept this and live, not too uneasily, with the sense of limitation it imposes. To accept too that the presence among us of native peoples with a very different view of man's responsibility towards the earth — his right to use and change and shape it — tends to limit any belief we might have that our own Western way of dealing with things is the only way that is right and human.

And the experience of space shaped us in another way. It existed in the mind of even the most confined city-dweller as the one commodity in a poor country — which is what we were, both of us, till fifty years ago — that was always in large supply. Space as *room*. Room to breathe, room to move, and a belief that we could afford to be generous in making room for others. It didn't always work, and we need to recall the lapses of this spirit of openness in us: in our case the hostility in the nineteenth century to the Chinese, and in the 1920s to Southern Europeans, our treatment of aliens, even if they were naturalised, in both wars, and of asylum-seekers now. But for most of our history a sense of physical space, and its reflection in us as psychological space, has made us open to possibility both in the society at large and in ourselves and encouraged us to be open as well to others.

We are such rich places now that it takes a small exercise of retrieval to recall that for most of our history it was struggle and heartbreak that shaped what we have of a national character and our notions of what a good and just society might look like.

It was hardship, isolation in the bush, grinding poverty in city slums, that created the hard-bitten stoicism of Australians, their scepticism towards every sort of utopian promise, their frugality, their dry humour, their tendency to cut down tall poppies and resent outsiders — overseas bankers, immigrants who might become a pool of cheap labour, theorists, ideologues, the bearers of modernism, and, as the other side of all this, that spirit of mutual regard and help we call mateship.

The idea of the battler dies hard in Australia, even among conservatives. There is no shame for us in needing a helping hand — in the bush you could not do without it,

and it has always been accepted in Australia that if we are to get by and live decently it is the business of government to readjust, so far as it is possible, the inequalities that come from bad luck, lack of opportunity or the many other factors in a complex world that might bring a man down. There has never existed in Australia that fundamental distrust of government and resentment of government interference that was there in America from the beginning. Jefferson's proposition, that the tree of liberty is watered with blood, like the American right to bear arms, has no place in our world. We see government as an arm of our will. We give governments money so that the poor, the sick, the old, the disabled, the unemployed, can live in a way that will not, as neighbours, shame us.

The one word that sums up what Australians demand of society, and of one another, is fairness, a good plain word that grounds its meaning in the contingencies of daily living. It is our version of liberty, equality, fraternity and includes everything that is intended by those grand abstractions and something more: the idea of natural justice, for instance. It's about as far as most Australians would want to go in the enunciation of a principle.

We have no equivalent of your Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the attempt on the centenary of Federation, in 2001, to produce a new Preamble to our Constitution resulted in little more than pious generalisations. There is some agitation for a Bill of Rights, largely as a way of enshrining rights for indigenous people, but it shows small sign of being implemented. Perhaps it is our preference for precedent our principle that makes us cling hard to experience rather than written codes as our guide to choice.

The appeal to fairness, for example, — 'it's not fair!' is one of the earliest formulations a small child discovers to express a recognition that life is a game that ought to have rules — immediately sets a question that might be difficult to argue in purely abstract terms, in a context where we are forced to recognise the subject of the question as another like ourselves; as if *we* stood where he stands and the subject was ourself. It is on these grounds that such questions were resolved — and most of them, by world standards, very early — as who in the new worlds we were creating should get the vote. All men, including those who did not own property? Catholics? Jews?

All women? Aborigines? The real question was, what argument for *unfairness* would have to be mounted to make exclusion possible?

I have been speaking here — directly about Australia by reflection about Canada — of the kind of forces — responses and adaptations to the particularity of place, imaginative leaps into the realm of social possibility — that have produced the very complex and original, but stable and secure societies we now enjoy.

There are continuities here, since history is not 'the past' but all that experience that has got us where we are, and which determines what we have as a guide now to dealing with the present.

The ease with which Australia has, in just a few years, moved on from being a basically British society to one that is complexly multi-ethnic, is only one more example of that adaptability and openness to change, to transformation, that was applied in the early days of the colony. And the same is true for an even larger shift we have made; from a nation that lived, as we used to say, off the sheep's back, to one whose economy now is based on services — tourism and the hospitality industries, education, IT —or on such high-tech products as fibre optics and advanced medical techniques. In 2000 we earned more from education than from wool. This is not just an economic shift. It has also, especially for Australian men, been a psychological one that asks them to redefine the way they see themselves and their maleness. All these adaptations and transformations have had to be made, as they always are, on the run.

Societies are improvisatory affairs, made from moment to moment and by many hands: they are of their very nature open and unfinished. The question is whether that formal thing we call a nation can be open and improvisatory in the same way. It's a question, it seems to me, that Australia and Canada have been exploring for most of their lives as nations, and given our very different conditions and history, in something like the same way.

When, after two decades of rather acrimonious argument, the Australian colonies decided, in 1901, to federate, they had a long history of separate existence and had their own very different styles of life. They had been founded at different times and by groups with very different notions of what they meant to be; had their own armies and navies, their own trade agreements with Britain and with the Colonial Office and

the Privy Council, their own police forces (we have never had a national police force like your Mounties), their own systems of education, and their rail-systems had different gauges. That Australia was a single land mass did not necessarily mane, at that point, that the continent had a manifest destiny as a single nation. The first rather cautious exploration of a single Australian identity — rather appropriately we might think — came with the unified cricket and Rugby teams we sent to Britain in the 1870s. In the first draft of the Federation places were reserved for New Zealand and Fiji.

Federation was a choice — the people's choice in a referendum — but a reluctant one. As the world's fourth federation we looked to the US and to Canada as models and took something from each. Unlike Canada, we named the limited powers that would go to the Commonwealth — trade and external affairs — and the states retained the rest. The states, more than a hundred years later, remain separate and strong; wary of one another and even more wary of Canberra. Especially of Canberra's tendency to argue, in its own interest, that our present three-tiered form of government is wasteful and inefficient, the push by Canberra policy-makers for a formalising Bill of Rights, and the signing by Canberra of UN declarations that impose laws on us that have not been put to the people's representatives or to its courts.

It takes a particular temper in a people, a particular feeling for order, and flexibility or looseness, to make a successful federation; a willingness to forego the centering of authority in a single place to a recognition that there may, without the whole enterprise flying apart, be room for several centres in dialogue but also in argument with one another.

To be comfortable with federation demands a certain state of mind, and more importantly, encourages it. We learn to enjoy diversity and seek it out, to find interest in difference, to relish the curiosity it rouses in us, the surprise it brings, the originality it tempts us to in ourselves, the new forms we learn to create through mixing — or 'fusion' as Australians call it in the case of food. We were too mixed from the beginning to be tempted by notions of purity, though Australians did for a time, in the great heyday of nationalism in the late 19th century, have their own dream of a manifest destiny. It was that if Australian could be kept white, and remain

predominantly Protestant, it might become the survival ground, when Britain itself failed, of British virtues and the British way of life. What is surprising now is not how strong the dream was, or how long it lasted, but how quickly it has faded and been forgotten.

Australia is not much held together by national sentiment. We still think of ourselves, except in sport or war, as Queenslanders, South Australians, Sydneysiders. We seldom fly the flag or sing the anthem, which was only decided on, by vote, in the 1980s, and most of us, after the first two lines, do not know the words. Those who do tend to scoff at them. It's the kind of nation most Australians feel comfortable in. Regionally diverse, highly decentralised, though Canberra in recent decades has enormously increased its power in national affairs (the Federal Government has the exclusive right, for example, to raise taxes), it is loose, casual, off-handedly humorous towards the things that usually constitute nationhood, but is also in the event remarkably cohesive and has survived without disruption for more than a century. Australians are happy with this fragmentary and provisional embodiment of what we might be, a nation 'in the making'. We get our clearest glimpses of it not on official occasions but when we find ourselves almost by accident in situations where we look about, see who is present, and say, 'Ah, so that's who we are!'

Election days seem to me to be such occasions. Given that voting is compulsory and always takes place on a Saturday, the whole population is abroad: the day has the mood of a national holiday.

Otherwise such occasions can be unpredictable. Like the procession of the Olympic torch through Sydney, for example, when two million people turned up to an impromptu festival at which the real spectacle, in the end, was themselves.

In fact we do have a national day, Australia Day, January 26th, which commemorates the landing at Sydney Cove. There are citizenship ceremonies, multicultural dancing, fireworks; celebrity ambassadors — a curious idea — are sent out to tell their fellow Australians what the day means to them. It has never caught on. Imposed from above, it celebrates an idea of nation that has never really taken, and there are many of us who feel uncomfortable with a day of national unity that some among us — Aborigines — see as a commemoration of invasion and dispossession.

What *has* emerged — slowly over recent decades and strongly in the last — is a nationwide response to Anzac Day, which, as it has passed out of the exclusive guardianship of the veterans' associations, has become a genuinely popular occasion, reclaimed and re-shaped by Australians at large as an occasion of many meanings: a solemn day for meditating on war, on service, on loss, on the tragic in life. That it keeps developing new significances, especially among the young, is the clearest indication that it is a living thing and will survive. A national day we have made out of bitter experience and a need for the consolations of ceremony, it speaks for another form of nation than the official one: a nation based on shared experience and dispersed in varied, complex and even contradictory feelings, but no less bonding for that.

One other factor that increasingly, I think, determines the way we see ourselves and the world.

Nothing defines a people more clearly than what they fear. Anxiety in your case springs from proximity — I'm sure I don't have to be more specific; ours from distance.

Our remoteness, down there in the south, might have made us independent. London for most of the nineteenth century was three months away; we were on our own, and far, as you were not, from interference. Instead we felt anxious and unprotected. Afraid that we might fall out of the world's consciousness, slip off the edge and be lost. What if history happened without us? Hence our eagerness to get in on all those *wars*: in the Sudan in the 1890s, the Boer War, World War I, in which we lost 62,000 men out of a population of four million. More insidiously, afraid of losing our whiteness, and going native or creole. Or of losing the attention of what was, after all, the major power of the day, of no longer being included in its wealth and influence or having the protection of its navy.

Canada has always, it seems to me, taken a bolder and more independent stance than we have. Towards the US certainly but also towards Britain: over independence in the 20s and 30s, over Suez, most recently over Iraq. We actually refused the independence you worked so hard for when it was offered us in the Statute of Westminster. We found it 'unnecessary'.

Perhaps distance has led us to believe that we can play with the big boys without falling too deeply into their hands. Placed where you are, you have never had that luxury. On the other hand you have never come close, as we did in 1942, to invasion, and you do not live, as we do now, in an 'arc of instability' — of potentially failed states.

You will have gathered by now that I do not have much to say about the nuts and bolts of politics, or of economics either. That is not because I don't think these things matter. They do. But what gives them their life and force as practice, and makes the practice assume this shape rather than another, are experiences, apprehensions, needs that work far below the level of event, and far below that realm too of argument and decision that brings one event rather than another into being and determines the particular shape and style of institutions. It is what belongs to this *lower* layer of a people's life that I want to point to.

The experience that embodies a people's interaction with the land they find themselves in — its spaces, its vagaries of soil and climate, all its particular 'conditions'.

The kind of language people use in articulating their world and dealing with one another.

The habit of mind they bring to the contingencies of daily living: open and inquisitive about new possibilities, inventive, unafraid of failure, or anxiously hedged about by rules, traditions that no longer fit, fear of the uncontrollable and unknown.

The temper that makes them choose this rather than that kind of state — federation for example: this or that form of nation.

A stance that does not always need to live with certainty but is happy, or happy enough, with open questions, with unfolding time and the unfinished, with what is still 'in the making'; that is curious about ends but happy in the meantime with the challenge and surprises of being 'on the way'.

This may sound abstruse, even vaporous, but it is in fact the condition in which Australians have lived rather successfully, and in great stability, for the major part of their history — and Canadians too, I'd guess. We are down-to-earth people, rooted, as

most people are, in the particularities of daily living. This is the *other* history, the interior history, of what we are and have achieved. It is where more happens and is decided than we recognise.

Three years ago we had a referendum in Australia to decide for or against a republic.

It was meant to be a very simple decision. What the republicans were arguing for was what was called the minimalist option, an Australian head of state to replace the Queen. It was the simplest piece of politics imaginable, and that was all it was, a change in the political sphere. The only emotional appeal was to national sentiment. The head of state would at last be one of *us*. At its crudest this became the slogan 'A resident for President'.

But there are no simple questions. As soon as you turn a question over to the people it develops nuances, complexities, because actual men and women refer it back to their own experience, bring to it their own expectations. What appeared simple picks up on their contradictions and becomes complex.

The question failed, for the simple reason that the people saw nothing in it. If that's all a republic was, a change in the head of state, what was the point of it?

No attempt was made to ground the idea of a republic in people's experience; to attach it to the principles Australians had developed and for so long lived by, to see it as the natural embodiment of those principles. There was no suggestion that *res publica*, commonwealth, is just what it says it is: what belongs to that public life, the common good, that as citizens we all belong to, and share, beyond our purely private lives; that the republic is about shared concern and affection between its members, the business of fairness, justice, the meeting of needs.

Once all this had been subtracted and the whole question reduced to the simple political one of the head of state, people simply were not touched. As if a republic is defined only by its head of state! And this was important, because in the experience of many new migrants, who now make up some thirty percent of us, this was just the sort of false republic they had fled from, a political fiction based round a head of state and dedicated to the mystification of presidential power.

In the event, only one of the seven states and territories, Victoria, voted yes, and by the narrowest margin.

What I have wanted to talk about tonight is the fabric of things, that dense interweaving of lived experience that gives texture to our political lives and structures and determines the choices we make about where we are going, what is to endure, what is to change. Without this, political questions and choices have no urgency, because they have no relation to what we are.

Which leads me back to that moment in 1848 when the Lafontaine-Baldwin administration had to decide how they were to respond to mob violence and the challenge to elected government.

Their refusal to meet violence with violence was an attempt to pre-empt the future. To create, in the heat of the present, what might constitute, in time, a cool and usable past. To establish a pattern of behaviour that the people would recogise as both practical and a reflection of their own temper.

What was decided at the moment was that in this society authority would neither be established nor maintained by violence, and that conflict would not be resolved by violence.

These moments when the temper of a society is defined and shown are decisive. It is these patterns of behaviour, this temper, more than any form of government that in the end determines the kind of society we create; how far it conforms to the common good; how, from one century to the next, it can be refered back to, and kept true to its own best self.