

Australia's new elite

Nick Cater's new book speaks to us as Jews, as Australians, and as Jewish Australians.

NICK Cater has written a bracing tract for our times. It's all the more welcome because it's that rare event these days: a book by an Australian patriot.

As with so many immigrants before him, Cater not only understands this is a land of opportunity, basic decency and civic virtue; he embraces those values and wants to defend them.

When Cater writes about "the migrant's imperative", his words will resonate with many Australian Jews who came "across the seas" and found haven and new lives, as well as with their children and grandchildren who have prospered here. No-one comes to Australia, Cater notes, for an easy time, they come here for a future.

"They do not seek deliverance, they seek the opportunity to deliver. This is not the promised land or the island of the blessed, but it is a land of promise that offers the chance of redemption." (p12)

More power to him. One of the many pleasures in reading *The Lucky Culture*, especially given Cater's skewering of "the bunyip alumni", the new graduate class, is the author's own cultural literacy. He's what an earlier generation understood when it said a writer was "well-read": in this case someone for whom the King James Version – see the above quotation – and Alexis de Tocqueville are not total strangers.

Cater is a friend and colleague, and so I do not pretend this is a disinterested review. He has written an elegant book, informed by historical memory and research, and replete with phrases, sentences and paragraphs which any wordsmith must both admire and envy. Although he avers that "the last thing the Australian publishing industry needs is another polemic", he has produced just that. In the best dictionary sense of the word: a controversial discussion. He may call it a "modest contribution to cultural archaeology", but it's far more than that.

Patriotism is not chauvinism, and Cater is not blind to Australia's flaws. But as an English immigrant who came here in the 1980s, he wants to proclaim his faith in this country's "lucky culture" because it works. Writes Cater: "We do not boast perfection, but we are committed to improvement, for our common duty is to Advance Australia Fair."

What worries Cater is that over more recent years, the Australia he found on arrival in the 1980s, while remaining "one tribe", is dividing up into "two distinct clans rallying around different totems: the insiders and the outsiders". A university-educated, would-be ruling class, who "live in different suburbs, shop and socialise in different places, listen to different radio stations, read different newspapers and websites, and adopt a different set of manners from the class we might call middle-Australia."

Partisan



SAM LIPSKI

For Cater this "inner clique that dominates politics, academia and the media" and regard themselves as better than their fellow Australians, are not just a new version of old divisions. Indeed, they cannot be understood by pigeon-holing them into the formerly familiar categories of left versus right, or Labor versus Liberal.

The new cosmopolitans are progressive, but anti-progress; they regard themselves as morally superior but disdain religion; they emphasise human rights but threaten open liberal debate. And their mode of public discourse, the sneer, is also something new and disturbing.

Cater argues this "open denigration of one's fellow Australians", has been aided and abetted by Twitter, and echoed on such ABC programs as Q&A by some panellists and in the way some of its studio audiences applaud it. He has a point, and his chapter on the ABC is an interesting, even intriguing historical survey of how the public broadcaster evolved to its present state.

Why does any of this matter? Basically, because when it comes to the wealth of nations, material and social, national culture matters and ideas about national identity matter. Cater believes, therefore, that Australia's future as a great country, the Civilisation of the South, is at stake. He is uneasy about the post-nationalism which mocks and seeks to replace the nation state, patriotic citizenship and national identity with the abstractions of "the universal rights of man".

While he does not refer to Israel's dilemmas and Jewish concerns about maintaining our own identity, Cater is posing much the same questions, which if we are serious, we need to confront as Jews. Australia does not face the existential threats, of course, that challenge Israel's future, and comparisons may seem simplistic. But Cater is grappling with a worldwide phenomenon – the perils of modernity amid its undoubted pleasures and achievements. Australia is not immune.

Yet ultimately Cater is not a cultural pessimist. To the degree that he places his bets on the future, he's betting on the "abundant reserves of human ingenuity, Australia's great renewable resources", which he found over beers in the Imperial Hotel's front bar in Ravenswood, Queensland. And I agree. These gifts of character, of "beauty rich and rare", which make Australia "the goldeneh medineh" – "the golden kingdom" – of the 21st century, are still worth betting on.

Nick Cater is the former editor of *The Weekend Australian* and is now the paper's chief opinion editor. *The Lucky Culture - And the Rise of an Australian Ruling Class*, Harper Collins Publishers, Sydney 2013.

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