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What do we want New Zealand's defining characteristics to be in 2020

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some thoughts on national character : past, present, future

National character is the lining on our souls. Its formed by environment, language - how we speak, the stories we tell, and how we behave towards one another. It's what comes naturally...

We can create a quick snap shot of 'national character' by dreaming up a series of headlines:

Man jumps from Eiffel Tower attached by thick rubber band.

Before you're halfway through the story you just know it involves a New Zealander. I mean, we don't send man to the moon. We jump from the Eiffel Tower with a rubber band attached to our ankle. It's more within our price range.

Or, how about this.

Dunedin fashion designer takes mannekins to Antarctica.

I heard her being interviewed on National Radio last week. She talked about lining up the mannekins on the ice shelf. She said: 'It looked so wrong but it felt so right.'

I think we know what she was talking about. And while were at it we might also recognise the true soul of the improviser.

The whole country is 'a test site,' wrote one poet. If that is so, then we are its Crusoes.

We are also the kind of people who are at ease culturally and socially wherever we go - it's what makes us great Peacemakers - without equal in my opinion.(except maybe the Irish)

And, I think we are still the same people who used to have the phrase 'a fair go' at the centre of their moral outlook.

BUT we ar also 'lazy' duplicitous', smug and complacent - that's how we appear to paul Theroux in his book The Happy Isles of Oceania.

And that's ok. To deny ourselves those aspects is to deny our us of our humanity.

But today, we're not really talking about a 'real' self as much as an 'ideal self.' Something to reach for.

We are all equals...we have equal opportunity...we believe in giving everyone a fair go...

Those are some of the stock phrases or defining characteristics I grew up with in the 60s and 70s..

We were also polite to foreigners and good to animals...we had the best rugby team in the world, the biggest trout, the best beaches...we had invented the jet engine. Our Ed was first to climb Everest...(all the sorts of boasts you find on kitchen t-towels probably still exist in places like Hamilton)...

Our nation-building stories were in place. Our confidence was soaring...

We could make all these claims for ourselves because there was no mirror to hold up to ourselves. The mirror was the rest of the world. We were in the world but not really of the world.

PRESENT

These days of course we are very much IN the world and affected by the great global wash of trade and culture.

Everyone in this room will be familiar with the huge structural changes to NZ life that began in the 1980s...and the shift from thinking of ourselves as fellow citizens to fellow consumers. Our old obligation to one another withered away under the implementation of the new stock phrase 'user pays.'

Defining characteristics for the year 2020

In the year 2020 it is almost impossible to say what kind of world we will find ourselves in...I think we can anticipate major structural change...the idea of community will be severely tested by tribal allegiances of varying kinds...by technological developments...and by population shifts. Already we see extraordinary mobility of population around the world. I suspect this phenomena will test the credibility of national boundaries.

Given that uncertain and shifting scenario what should be this country's defining characteristics?

Rather than crystal ball gaze I think we can find an answer in past commentary.

Consider this line from Allen Curnow's poem Landfall in an Unknown Sea (written in 1942 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of Tasman's sighting of New Zealand).

'Simply by sailing in a new direction
You could enlarge your world...'

That line speaks to us as individuals. It also speaks to us as a nation.
To a large extent one of our defining characteristics has been to reinvent the world.

Let me give you some examples:

. In 1857 the archdeacon of Christchurch in a letter back to the old country reported a conversation he'd had with a woman who told him: 'She was born in a V hut and Christianed in a pie dish...'

Around the same time, up in Wellington, the gentlemen of that city were hiring hands to trundle them home from parties in wheelbarrows.

Fastforward to the present day and we have Michel Tuffery creating cows out of cans of corned beef and another Wellington creates portraits out of slices of toast.

Ours, you could say, is very much an improvised world.

We do like the new, and embrace the new. The downside of that is we risk turning in to chameleons and eroding our essential and authentic self.

In the mid-80s an edict from Wellington declared ours to be a bi-cultural society.

No sooner had we embraced that and incorporated the Treaty principles in to playcentre charters around the country, and there was another declaration : not only were we 'bi' but we were now 'multi' - a multi-cultural society.

To add to the confusion, a PM of that time, declared to a startled world that we were no longer a Pacific nation : we were an Asian nation.

Apparently our latest improvising skills had brought about a reconfiguring of geography.

Challenges

1. By 2020, as globalisation gathers apace our idea of self - our authentic self - will take a hammering unless we guard it, bolster it, nourish it.

2. I think some of our 'nation' stories need re-emphasizing.

As Curnow hinted at, our historic story (which is to say our future story as well) is based around new navigational routes leading to a new place in the world, resulting in a new population with new eyes, new possibilities, new ways of being.

3. One of the proudest moments I felt as a New Zealander in recent times was when we took those poor people off the Tampa.

We have plenty of space here for more people. Or, do we? That will be a question for the coming generation to settle.

Along with this - if we bump up the population where should those people come from?

Does it matter? And, should we accept simply because they want to be here? Or, continue with the current avarice of accepting only those with a decent bank balance on the grounds that those with money make our own lives easier.

In 2020 there will be more Tampas, more human misery calling for immediate humanitarian action.

We don't want to be that inn keeper who will take advantage of an over-booked town to charge exorbitant rates.

We want kindness to be a trait. We want to continue to give people 'fair go.'

4. If we embrace the notion of 'newness' through our story telling and immigration policies, and if we want to bring new products and new ways of doing things to the rest of the world then we need a much more rigorous and demanding education system.

The kind of people produced today are more confident, sophisticated and cleverer than my own generation. We have the education system to thank in part and a growth of a large middle class with better parenting skills.

However some serious tweaking needs to be done.

The idea that a child can leave school at 16 is a scandal. In my view, it is a form of child abuse. The idea that there is a place in the world for an uneducated, unskilled 16 year old is the cruelest kind of hoax.

5. By 2020, I imagine we will see the mobilisation of two significant groups of people. One, a well-educated elite who will move around the globe in the spirit of gold prospectors from an earlier age. The mobility of this group and the mobility of the global poor will present a difficult exchange.

How do we retain the first group? How do we balance our needs with our responsibilities to the second group?

6. The challenge for a more stratified and diverse society will be to get the 'buy in to a set of values that we tuck in behind the notion of 'national character.'

Twenty or thirty years ago, a more homogenous and egalitarian society made this an easier task.

7. A small country such as ours - and we will still be small in 2020 - can afford to be inclusive.

Not only can we afford to be we need to be for two reasons. One, our population is already too small to give up on ten, twenty, twenty-five percent of the population.

Two, we want everyone to have useful lives. It may not be possible to achieve but it is a worthy and moral ambition.

Finally, I will leave you with the shortest poem in the English language. It was recited in full by Muhammed Ali in an address at Yale. It goes - are you ready -

Me

We.

That's it. Thank you.