

MY TRAVELS with AUSTRALIA FAIR: A FADING AFFAIR

Stepping into the Terra Nullius Colony....

Sydney, September spring 1961. I disembarked from the P&O *SS Strathmore* at Circular Quay. Teen son of a junior Indian diplomat posted to Canberra. Immigration and Customs processed us at the pier itself, a benign Sovereign Border then. Their correct but cold treatment of us was in marked contrast to the solicitous greetings offered to the incoming Pound10 pommies also disembarking.

My father had warned me of the Australian preference for shades of white. The some 700 displaced refugees on the *SS Misr* barely fourteen years before had been greeted as a bunch of "so many Jews, of so many swarthy dark-skinned southern Mediterranean, un-British, un-Australian, unsuitable aliens".¹ They were perceived as a threat to White Australia.

Then there was the foreign policy establishment's unhappiness with India. That stemmed from a still-simmering controversy sparked in 1954 by the then Indian High Commissioner, Field Marshal Cariappa. No diplomat he. The decorated WWII hero made no secret of his resentment that Australia welcomed any white immigrant, even from former enemy countries, over Indians who had fought alongside the diggers in both Great Wars from Europe to the Middle East to Burma.

Cariappa's hobnobbing with war-mates, particularly Australia's Governor-General, Viscount Slim, fermented fears in the Melbourne establishment that a cabal to undermine the White Australia policy was in the making. That Lord Mountbatten, Governor-General of independent India, had sought a dilution of the policy in its favour stoked the xenophobe psyche. The Establishment's

view sat well with the conspiracy theory then circulating that the British would "put the commercial interests of its polyglot Empire over the Australian ideal of a racially pure continent".²

Beyond the dawning realisation that Australians were prone to antipathy towards non-white human hues, I knew only school-boyish rudiments, mainly cricket, about the country.

...and an Introduction to White Australia

Initial encounters with white countenances, polite but seasoned with condescension, were nevertheless way out of sync with expectations of hostile behaviour. Within days of arrival, I commenced an apprenticeship with a firm of Chartered Accountants in Canberra. Then a veritable village masquerading as a capital - oxymoronic to eyes from teeming Delhi – it had been indelibly branded by the US Ambassador as "half the size of Washington cemetery and twice the silence". Reputedly, he is the only American Ambassador to have been rebuked in Australian diplomatic history.

The earliest discordant notes were encounters with Christianity in action. The Church presence in Canberra appeared disproportionate to whatever solace 50000 - odd souls required. Weekly, sundry evangelists, fishing for converts besieged my housewife mother. But she, armed with intellectual fangs honed by chess and bridge and dipped in spiritual discourse, thwarted conversion attempts.

My employment came tinged with similar evangelism through sponsored trips to Christian youth retreats in the Blue and Snowy Mountains. I was not pliable but incurred no professional retribution. I attribute that to the innate Australian cultural ethos of 'fair go' then prevailing. That I, an awkward brown boy, was received so readily into the then highly conservative profession, set the tone of my long affair with Australia Fair.

My employment and evening TAFE classes brought me into contact with motley gangs of post-teens. Voluntarily working twelve-hour days, I was baffled by their insouciant work culture; they were preoccupied with 'hot-souping' Holdens, latest beer brands, "hambones" at Yarralumla/Tralee woolshed dances, and (mystifyingly) "wetting" girls. I was innocent of such distractions, content with breaking open a (then-novel) Bushells' teabag accompanied by one, firm - sanctioned Arnott's bickie at work breaks.

All-male collegial conversations were rarely interrupted by domestic politics though stray comments on Commies, Alps, Libs and "Cathos" (DLP) figured occasionally. "West" meant Britain; despite the WWII alliance, America had yet to enter the consciousness of these budding financiers. Japan represented "Asia", all agreeing that none would buy a Japanese car. Cricket only defined India. The rest of Asia consisted mainly of brown British subjects and Chinese "yellow hordes", who had not had the grace to become one.

On the ethnic front, "Dagos" were Italian. "Wogs" meant Greeks, Maltese and sundry "Meds". Oddly that acronym also applied to sub-continental natives educated under English tutelage. Reflecting the reigning race bias, Germanics and "Balts" were not tagged at all. There was no "black" epithet for there were none to be seen. "Abos" existing in nether lands did not count. Presumably, I was a wog behind my back.

Hesitant toe-dips into the mainstream outside my cloistered world of work and study dramatically transformed when I fell in with a group of recruits, (apprehensively) trafficked into Canberra from interstate by the Australian Public Service. Menzies' mandate to make Canberra the symbol and seat of Federal power was evolving.

More than that, this nationwide recruitment was a significant step towards forging an Australian national identity. It brought together the best and brightest graduates, including women, drawn from diverse geographical, family, educational and religious backgrounds and versed in varied academic disciplines to make decisions from the national perspective. Regional loyalties that had so divisively shadowed the Federation's history were gradually blurred. Canberra became a melting pot of diverse Anglo-Celts, a precursor to what Australia was to become on a vaster multi-cultural scale.

Their company exposed me to facets of Australian life that lay beyond arid accountancy, to the very art of conversation and intellectual enquiry. I ditched a promising career and enrolled in the Australian National University.

.....and into the Maelstrom of the 60s

Perversely, White Australia had worked in my favour in the then egalitarian social environment. People assumed that if I was there, I had a right to be there. 'Illegals' were unknown. Once past that hurdle, my (bearded) differentness complemented a growing mystique about India, thanks mainly to Beatlemania – "Norwegian Wood", Shankar's sitar, meditation *et al.* – raining down on us in the Age of Aquarius. It served me well in those times of borderline nihilism and the borderless sexual revolution.

I had entered ANU as a 'mature student', one of a smattering of non-Caucasians. Student radicalism increasingly marked Australian campuses those days. Menzies' old order was in decline; post-war babies were catching up with their western counterparts. Unbridled libertarianism questioned the presumed wisdom of the 'oldies' on all and everything: sex, aboriginal rights, music, discrimination against women, abortions, national anthem, drugs, homophobia, hair and hemlines.

Despite being a foreigner and an accountant at that – hardly fitting credentials in an anti-bourgeois milieu – I was elected Chair of the ANU Students Union Board three years running. No one questioned this (abstinent) non-citizen arguing that if "Fellows" had their Staff Club bar, why not undergrads? The Sir John Crawford-led University Council endorsed the first students' pub in an Australian academic institution. My only legacy to ANU. (Yes, Pauline, this pollywog from Asian swamps was already corrupting the values of 'real' Australian youth.)

Participating in anti-Vietnam protests, Frank Hardy's Freedom Marches, and anti -Telstra Tower blockades on Black Mountain prompted warnings, rightly but gently, from ASIO functioneers about my temporary resident status. No hint of reckoning. Such velvet-gloved hands are unlikely to be proffered today.

The sixties were my Dreamtime. I cannot recall a single incident of overt racism. An Australian offspring from Tassie outback, hailing from a conservative Australian-style landed gentry, accepted me as her partner. Her audacity in flouting social conventions fifty years ago would be unimaginable to most entering the fluid inter-racial matrimonial stakes in Australia today.

But it was not all a lay down misere. By then, I had segued to a cultural hybrid no longer tied to old or new moorings. Questions about self-identity had begun to gnaw. The immediate catalyst was Indira Gandhi's visit to Australia, first-ever by an Indian Prime Minister. The 1967 famine was decimating Indian farmers. She had rejected offers of Israeli assistance. At a public meeting, I asked why? She sprayed an incoherent reply. That evening at a banquet hosted by PM Gorton, she glared at me. The suspension of my Indian passport followed. Stateless, I feared deportation, but in those pre-IT days, Immigration was oblivious to it all. Eventually, after due massaging Indian style, the *status quo* was restored.

Upon marriage, doubts assailed me about acquiring Australian citizenship. Relinquishing the birth identity is wrenching. But I was opposed to dual nationality. Still am. Who would you fight for? Though uncertain of my identity but more aware of my emotional and intellectual immersion in the Australian way of life, I surrendered my Indian nationality.

Foreign Affairs Dawn

Post-university, grounded in Australian custom and lingo, I felt at home. India receded. The Department of External Affairs, now Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), recruited me as a "graduate clerk". I was a rare non-Caucasian so selected. The suspicion was inescapable that my entry into a citadel of the Establishment reflected at the least a smidgeon of affirmative action consonant with birthing multiculturalism. Perhaps.

DFAT's progression through changing times provides as good a mirror as any to what Australia was and is. The Department's very nomenclature, "External Affairs", was a colonial hangover confirming the Dominion's subservience to London on foreign relations and security. Replicating the Old Dart's Foreign Office, it had a caste system segregating the Brahmins, the Diplomats, from Administrative clerks. It was also a closed shop. Entry to the priestly caste was based on academic excellence, social background and discreet, sometimes nepotistic, recommendations. Nothing could impede their advance up the bureaucratic ladder – apart from the unpardonable sin of spying for a foreign power. Plebian public servants within or without could rarely enter the *sanctum sanctorum*.

It is against this backdrop that I entered DFAT's hallowed neo-Stalinist portals to report to the Management supremo. Acknowledging me perfunctorily, he turned to his off-sider, clad in the Renouf-era newly recommended rig, contemptuously observing, "Where will it all end?" Prescient

remark indeed! The recently retired Foreign Secretary and the current High Commissioner to India are of Indian origin.

I was exiled to an office *outside* the HQ with a brief to research electric over manual typewriters' efficacy. Astonishingly, they were. My next assignment was to redesign departmental forms.

That period was the first jolt to my self-serving delusion that I was an insider in the Australian biosphere. In fact, I was only a sub-caste within the administrative class. I returned from postings to Beijing and Beirut, scarred by the exploitation of my vulnerability as an outlier in the system. But also fortified with sufficient nous to rebel against the Department's caste system. I appealed against the promotion of the latest batch of diplomatic trainees. Within rules, but unprecedented. Three hearings later, I crashed through.

My success played a bit part in eventual systemic DFAT reforms. The management then comprised a nimble crop in tune with the causes and aspirations of the maturing post-war generation, and with changing geo-political and economic trends. They were confident about where Australia's economic interests lay: Asia. (Compare Menzies' curt rejection of Nehru's invitation to attend the 1947 Asia Pacific Conference in Delhi as a member of the Asian community.)

By the mid-90s, the fabric of the foreign policy establishment had become woven by non-Anglo Saxons. However, an undercurrent of resentment against seeming affirmative action was also discernible. Management held firm, appointing me to sensitive positions and then as a senior diplomat to India. The decision to post a first-generation migrant back to his country of origin was unprecedented for *any* Western Foreign Service. Posting the son of a former Indian diplomat to Australia as an Australian diplomat to India even more so. It caused inevitable disquiet in

predictable quarters. It conclusively dented Indian preconceptions of Australia as a racist White bastion and set a precedent for Western Foreign Services.

Australian White Nativism and I

The end of the 100-year-old White Australia policy and embrace of multiculturalism transformed Australia in one-and-a-half generations into something that took America six, a melting pot. Australia emerged from atavistic British petticoat folds to become a beacon of social change and tolerance in the Asia-Pacific. And I was a beneficiary of its central tenet: the acceptance of the "other".

By the turn of the century, though, cultural fault lines were evident. The toxic combination of Hanson's white nationalism and Howard's political acquiescence to it had taken its toll. Divisive debates on Asian migration, *Tampa* and refugee policy evolved into inter-cultural corrosion. Then came *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the war on terrorism. A narrative of anti-multiculturalism has since taken hold nurturing an Ethno-nationalist xenophobic climate. The idea of an enlightened Australian ethos has suffered collateral damage. As have I.

The protection of Australian values is at the core of the White Nativist case: the 'outsider' must accept majoritarian values as *quid pro quo* for Australian shelter. A furfy. The very values they cite are fraying. The egalitarianism ideal is tattering amidst debilitating economic and educational inequality. Fair go? Ask Aborigines or denizens of off-shore refugee camps. And "mate-ship", echoing a nostalgic male ritual, is not exactly the mantra of a highly competitive millennial society, now including empowered women.

Notably, it is only the values of non-Caucasian migrants that are under the scanner. The white-grained have morphed into "New Australians", their values unquestioned. Moreover, the advocacy of "our values" glorifies nationalism, not patriotism. Nationalism postulates that a shared past by

history, blood or land is incapable of being shared by "the other". This proposition provides the subliminal justification for prosecuting refugees, ignoring the marginalised and excluding 'outsiders'.

Fair-minded Australians share the values the 'value ideologues' so hypocritically espouse. But the difference is that the latter manipulates this nativist measure as an ideological mask for 'marking' those who are not at the least "new Australians" if not the dinky-di, true-blue breed. The Australian biomass has shaped my western rationalist values and mores over sixty years. I should fit the bill. But no. I am perceived as more foreign now than I was during White Australia days. In the high street, perceptions of, and interfaces with me are based on my profile as one of "middle eastern appearance", not on my values.

Racial profiling of individuals consciously or unconsciously is now a fact of life. A Caucasian is taken at face value in day to day interactions; religion is irrelevant. Thus, Bosnian refugees in 1999 were Muslim, but also white, and therefore viewed sympathetically as European victims. In contrast, reminiscent of "they all look Greek to me", people of "middle eastern appearance" are perceived as potentially hostile Muslims. The quality and intent of interactions subtly alter.

Following 9/11, an airport customs search yielded a magazine article on Osama, enough to be detained; it took a day to prove my credentials. Women are generally wary; sales-women slither away. Beach excursions are uncomfortable; stares range from the guarded to the malevolent, somewhat cutting for a youth spent disporting recklessly on beaches from Bega to Broulee to Bondi. Politically correct roving officers at security-sensitive locations invariably question a nearby Caucasian before me, the real target all along. Politically correct, but demeaning.

In 2002, at ANZAC Day dawn services in Canberra, anxious glances blitzed me. An AFP uniform sidled up. Clearly, I was a 'person of interest'. It was prudent to retire hurt. Ironic. Having

coordinated the upkeep of diggers' laden cemeteries at various postings overseas, participation in ANZAC Day services has become an annual emotional pilgrimage. More recently, following the Lindt Café tragedy, a fifty-something lady turned to me while browsing in Myers, "We do not want people like you here," she primly informed me. Stunned, I asked if she knew who the first Prime Minister of Australia was. She stomped off. My local credentials would have been more plausible if I had asked who won the VFL in 1982.

Pigmentation trumps values almost invariably. Value ideologues baying for repealing Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act to "protect free speech" fail to comprehend this because as Caucasians, they have never faced discrimination in Australia. Stray racial insults in the public domain are increasing steadily. Would a firm rejoinder by the victim of a racial slur invite a reasoned debate? Or fisticuffs? Would my vilifying an Anglo Australian be interpreted as my exercising the right of free speech? That right cannot be divorced from *who* wields it.

Three Score and 10 years into my life....

I feel foreign in Australia, uncomfortable with the coalition of uncertainties stemming from culture wars. I have lived here longer than 72.35% of our populace. And yet, I now face an internal duality and external dichotomy because there is a disconnect between who I am and how I am perceived, even adjudged. Earlier, the main street accepted me, but not by the Establishment; now it is the reverse. `

Until the 90s, Australia was travelling smoothly towards an inter-cultural society, harmonious and socially cohesive. My generation batch mates, Hanson, Howard & Associates, have since derailed multiculturalism's intent. Streaks of intolerance and racism again impress upon national consciousness. Diverse communities are flourishing but as monocultural islands, apart from each

other and the mainstream. An inclusive national civic culture and social solidarity are not congealing.

Searching for self-identity once again under the lucky country's sun is just too taxing. If "there are no foreign lands. It is the traveller only who is foreign"³, I should accept myself as an exile at home. Perhaps only the First Nationals of this ancient land possess an indelible identity. From their perspective, I have little to whinge about. Two hundred twenty-eight years after settlement, they still await a civilisational dividend from the occupying culture and, worse, have received no gratitude from successive waves of other peoples who have benefitted from their nation.

I wonder in which cultural climes to wither. India offers only a sense of a common heritage; otherwise, its use-by date has passed for me. Australia Fair now receives me with angular, not emulsifying embraces. Disenchanted with its promise that "For those who've come across the seas/We've boundless plains to share", this once passionate affair is now fading.

¹ *The First Wave*, SMH Multimedia, 2007

² *Field Marshal K.M. Cariappa: The Australian Years*. Professor David Walker, Deakin University.

³ *The Silverado Squatter*, R.L. Stevenson