

**Queensland Irish Association: Annual St Patrick's Day dinner
Saturday 15 March 2003, The Irish Club
"Australia Our Nation" – toast**

Chief Justice Paul de Jersey AC

I am most honoured to have been asked to propose this toast.

At this time, many people of course are reflecting on Australian nationalism – not because Australia Day has just past, or because Anzac Day approaches; not even because we have just moved into the season of lent when many things fall for reappraisal – but, obviously, because of the developing role intended for Australia in the context of emergent international affairs.

As proud Australians, we do not need to be reminded of what makes our nation great, what makes its citizens great Australians, although attempts to distil the essence of our psyche do not necessarily produce uniform views. What qualities betray us? Fortitude and tenacity in the face of adversity, adherence to the concept of a "fair go" – helping others less fortunate, egalitarianism, broad mindedness, good humour – these are qualities often suggested.

But beyond that, something may be drawn by pondering the converse: what renders some of our less well-balanced fellows "un-Australian", unfortunate though that term may be.

I was interested to read examples offered in a recent analysis by the Sydney Morning Herald weekend magazine: not adding "o" to your mate's first name"; thinking cricket would be a better game if it went for only 90 minutes; knowing all the words of "Advance Australia Fair": indeed, singing the national anthem at above a mumble; to go swimming and not say: "It's cold at first but beautiful once you're in"; and, dare I repeat it, to think even some New Zealand things are better than their Australian counterparts.

But taking that a serious and positive step further, there is no doubt to my mind that the egalitarian nature of our society is our distinctive feature, especially acknowledging, again dare I express it, our historically British roots. That flattening of social orientation is hardly surprising, again historically, with the composition of the group arriving here in 1788 to augment the centuries old Aboriginal culture, including, as we know, Irish rebels.

As we are belatedly acknowledging, the Australian psyche has been enriched, will be enriched, by those who join us from afar. My thesis this evening is that the enriching element is pre-eminently Irish.

Let us not forget that Irish people accounted for approximately one-quarter of the 160,000 convicts sent to the Australian colonies, and that as many as 300,000 Irish people migrated to Australia in the decades encompassing the Great Famine and the First World War. And what of the present? In the 2001 census, more than 50,000 people identified themselves as having been born in Ireland, but as many as 10% of our population, almost 2 million, boasted Irish ancestry. That permanent population is boosted by the 12,000 Irish people who visit Australia on working holiday visas annually. Evidently, the Gold Coast beaches remain as much of an attraction to sun-starved Irish youngsters as does the ageless Molly Malone statue to Australian travellers.

While the size of the Irish community in Australia may be somewhat variable and uncertain, what is clear is that its members have proven extremely active and successful over the years. Social, sporting, cultural and fraternal Irish clubs and associations now number over 100 in Australia. Moreover, in material terms, persons of Irish birth earn an average of \$77 a week more than persons of Australian birth. To the uninitiated, that difference may be unexpected. It's less surprising, however, when one acknowledges that over 1 million pints of Guinness are sold during the St Patrick's Day weekend in this country. Irish ex-pats may be away from home, but they still appreciate life's necessities.

And then there are the Irish/Australian heroes: six of our seven Prime Ministers between 1929 and 1949 boasted Irish forebears; a number of our Prime Ministers have had Irish backgrounds, including James Scullin, John Curtin, Ben Chifley, Paul Keating and John Howard; pardon my observation also that the Chief Justices of Victoria between 1857 and 1935 were all born in Ireland.

And then there are the others who have challenged us.

Peter Lalor, an Irishman, led the 1854 rebellion at the Eureka Stockade. Thereafter juries in the criminal court refused to convict 13 of the leaders who were arrested, and it is noteworthy that Lalor was subsequently elected to the Victorian parliament and served as a cabinet minister and speaker of the Victorian Legislative Assembly. ...And then there is Ned Kelly!

I hope I don't presume in saying that I think the late Bob Douglas would have delighted in hearing that catalogue of Irish influence.

What more, ladies and gentlemen, need I say? We live in a great nation. It owes much to its great Irish origins, and the substantial continuing Irish enrichment. I applaud you for the pivotal role of the Irish in making Australia a great nation, a significant international contributor: a nation where those traditionally Irish qualities of fortitude, fairness, equality and good humour matter a great deal.

Would you please rise and join with me in drinking to:... "Australia our nation"!