

REAPRA ROUNDTABLE SERIES

Australia's Identity & Co-creating for Generational Impact

Sydney Roundtable

Tuesday 2 June • 5:00–8:00 PM
The Porter Haworth, Sydney NSW

Introduction

Preface

In this Reapra Roundtable, we conducted a deep dive into the identity of Australia, the contexts and development of worldviews (lenses), tendencies, and the tensions between them—almost as if Australia were a person itself. By unpacking its complex identity, we sought to better understand the nuances of its cultural landscape, the social and economic systems that support it, and therefore the challenges and systemic problems that arise from it.

Beyond this, the discussion informed how we might choose to interact with Australia in ways that co-create generational impact and deep systemic change.

Throughout this two-part conversation, a number of themes emerged that helped frame the discussion. Participants drew widely across fields of knowledge, bringing together professional expertise and personal experience to enrich the dialogue.

Dialogue

The dialogue was largely phenomenological, meaning that it was neither intended to establish factual accuracy nor place a value judgment on one opinion over another. Rather, participants adopted a meta-observational approach to explore how Australia and its people have experienced their story, in order to better understand why its identity is perceived the way it is today. Participants embraced tension, respectfully tolerated differing perspectives, and channelled that energy toward the co-creation of change.

The Roundtable brought together invited speakers with unique perspectives, alongside members of the general public who had registered to participate. The discussion was facilitated by James Bitanga from Reapra, who opened each theme and invited reflections from participants throughout the sessions.

Intended Outcome

The outcome of this Roundtable is to create a dynamic draft of Australia's identity (as-is) as a starting point to discuss its future aspirational identity (to-be). This paper is not meant to be academic in nature, but rather a synthesis of experiences from a diverse set of individuals, that can serve as a launchpad for future research and community collaboration in several forms.

Facilitator & Speakers

Facilitator

James Bitanga

Next-Gen Leadership, REAPRA

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As a reformed lawyer and angel investor in the media and tech space, James has completely reoriented his career towards addressing social systemic issues that may take decades to transform. His mastery is to co-create next generation leadership and inspire more people to integrate business with well-being over longer time horizons.

Speakers

Christopher Selth

Muzo.ai, Australian Events Industry Collective

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With a focus on people and place and a mission to re-village the world and honour all life, Chris is an expert in complex systems, impact & ESG, technology, strategic appraisal of business models, economics, valuation, market technicals, portfolio construction and financial risk management. He is a fund manager with close to 30 years' experience, including Head of International Equities at BT Funds Management, and Founder and Chief Investment Officer for Five Oceans Asset Management.

Darren Toh

COO, Blak Sustainability

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Darren is a father, storyteller, strategist, and operator whose life's work is anchored in purpose, shaped by service, and driven by a relentless pursuit of enduring impact.

Nicholas Robson

Co-Founder, NXT Interactive and Founder with REAPRA

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A recent IFD graduate of the Reapra IFD program under James Bitanga's guidance as facilitator, Nicholas is the first founder about to start his FLP in Australia.

Selena Griffith

CEO, Enactus Australia

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/selena-griffith/>

Selena Griffith is a seasoned leader with experience across NFP, tertiary education, local government, start-up and consumer brands. She leverages her design, innovation, community development, and engagement skills to support sustainability, social impact, innovation and entrepreneurship. As a systems thinker with a broad range of interests, Selena is a self-described specialist generalist, an author of papers and books on collaboration, innovation, and entrepreneurship, a producer of large-scale public artworks, an educator, and an entrepreneurial leader. She is passionate about working with people to create opportunities for them to deliver outstanding projects.

Tim Moriarty

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Drawing from both his love of Western and Indigenous cultural identities, Tim is a music technologist and creative artist and true co-creator, whose life goal and body of work aims to bridge these things for a neurodivergent world—helping navigate and draw from the past (the old way culture), and also the synthesis of new traditional Indigenous culture, technology and systems, continuing a tradition of 70,000 years of fusion and adaptability for the planet and people equally.

Part 1: Australia's Identity

Historical Perspective of Australia's Identity

The roundtable in Sydney began with discussing how people commonly understand Australia based on trade and story, and one thing Australians are very good at is telling stories. This comes from Indigenous traditions of storytelling, which have been a fundamental part of life on this continent for tens of thousands of years.

Australia began as a colony, but over time the idea emerged that it could be more than just a prison colony. Convicts talked to other convicts, built communities, and many of the best stone buildings were built by convict labour. The question gradually became: how can we build a beautiful colony? People would often spend around three hours a day doing hard labour, with the remaining hours available for other activities. One participant shared that one side of her family descended from convicts, while the other side descended from colonial administrators.

One of the major problems at the beginning was that there was no acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples. Aboriginal culture was stifled by the intrusive colonial culture that followed settlement. Over time, many waves of migration and settlement arrived in Australia, contributing to a culture where people wanted to innovate, hustle and get ahead.

Today, we are at a potentially dangerous point in history, as some people want to return to the ideas and attitudes of the earliest colonial period. However, Australia's diversity is one of its greatest strengths. Our biggest challenge is maintaining that diversity and continuing to value it.

Australia is a constrained space with limited resources, which means people have often had to work together to survive. If we can continue that spirit of cooperation, we can inspire the next generation. We cannot afford to fall back into a right-wing, colonial approach to understanding Australia and its future.

Perception Is Reality: Ethnic Diversity in Australia

One participant shared his earliest memory of arriving in Australia in 1982 as a five-year-old child, living on the outskirts of Melbourne. At the time, many teachers had little experience with multiculturalism, and cultural diversity was far less common than it is today.

He recalled one of his first interactions at school. A large white boy approached him, saying “ching chong” while other children danced around him. The children appeared to be having fun, so he joined in and played along. Looking back, he described it as an absurd game. At the time, he did not fully understand what was happening, but the experience shaped a perspective that has stayed with him throughout his life: perception is reality.

Rather than seeing the situation as one of fear, exclusion, or displacement, he perceived it as an opportunity to make new friends and form connections. He chose to participate rather than withdraw, and what began as a seemingly negative interaction became a moment of connection. The boy who had initially mocked him eventually became one of his closest friends, remaining a friend until they were in their forties.

This story led into a broader discussion about perception and identity. Because people are constantly bombarded with information, our reality is shaped not only by what happens around us, but by what we

are conditioned to notice and focus on. This applies to personal identity as much as it does to collective identity. If people see themselves primarily as outsiders, victims, or aliens, that becomes their reality. If they see themselves as part of a broader culture and community, they are more likely to recognise those connections everywhere around them.

The participant suggested that the question of Australian identity is fascinating because it depends on where we place our attention. What aspects of Australian identity do we choose to focus on? What conditions and possibilities do we notice that help shape our understanding of who we are? For him, Australian identity is ultimately about creating an environment where people who are vastly different from one another can still form meaningful friendships and connections, even when those relationships begin with misunderstanding or negative intentions.

Conversations continued to explore how the majority of people in Australia come from minority backgrounds, highlighting the country's very different social and cultural landscape. This diversity is a defining characteristic of contemporary Australia and shapes the way Australians understand identity, community and belonging.

A participant referred to a comment made at a previous roundtable discussion, where Australia was described as one of the most successful multicultural countries in the world. He noted that one measure of this success is Australia's ability to sustain a social welfare network despite its cultural diversity. Many social welfare systems were originally developed in relatively monocultural societies, yet Australia has demonstrated that such schemes can also function effectively within a multicultural context. The participant suggested that this ability to apply and maintain these systems across a diverse population is an important indicator of Australia's success as a multicultural nation.

Positive Aspects of Australia's Identity

Participants discussed the idea that Australia does not need to change or homogenise its differences in order to create a shared identity. Instead, the challenge is to weave together diverse experiences and perspectives like a tapestry. The focus should be on finding positive ways forward without reverting to colonial approaches or imposing uniformity.

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the importance of playfulness, curiosity, and inquiry. Participants suggested that these qualities are worth preserving because they encourage people to remain open to new ideas, experiences, and perspectives. Curiosity was described as a defining characteristic that helps Australians engage with difference rather than fear it.

Several participants reflected on the absence of a strong superiority complex within Australian culture. Rather than seeing themselves as better than others, Australians were described as curious, explorative, and interested in different perspectives. This was contrasted with cultural narratives that place greater emphasis on hierarchy, status, or national superiority. Participants suggested that one of Australia's strengths is the freshness of its perspective and its willingness to question, explore, and learn.

The discussion also explored the value Australians place on egalitarianism. One participant reflected on experiences working with people from more hierarchical cultures, noting that teams can struggle when status and rank become barriers to communication. In contrast, Australians felt compelled to speak with everyone as an equal and saw this as a distinctive feature of Australian culture. The expectation that people engage with one another on equal terms was viewed as an important contributor to social cohesion.

The idea that everyone belongs in the same room was another recurring theme. Participants emphasised that inclusion requires active engagement and participation. Meaningful relationships and understanding do not happen automatically; they depend on people choosing to engage with one another.

The conversation also acknowledged that Australia is deeply shaped by historical trauma. Participants noted the trauma associated with the First Fleet and colonisation, as well as the ongoing trauma experienced by Aboriginal peoples. At the same time, they argued for the importance of maintaining a positive vision for the future. Stories were shared of women from the First Fleet writing letters home encouraging others to commit crimes so they could be transported to Australia, seeing the colony as a place of opportunity and possibility. This tension between hardship and opportunity was seen as part of Australia's story. Rather than focusing solely on the past, participants emphasised the importance of asking how Australia can continue to improve and create a better future for everyone.

Division, Identity and Social Cohesion

Participants discussed the legacy of colonisation and the ways in which division can be used as a form of social control. One perspective raised was that colonial systems often relied on creating and reinforcing divisions between communities, making it easier for power to remain concentrated in the hands of a small elite. Similar patterns were noted across different parts of the world, including India and Africa, where stories about why different groups should distrust one another were used to maintain separation. Participants suggested that these dynamics continue to exist globally and argued that Australians should resist attempts to turn communities against each other.

This led to a discussion about language and identity. One participant expressed discomfort with the term “First Nations”, arguing that it can create an “us and them” distinction that feels divisive. They suggested that acknowledgement practices should also recognise non-Indigenous Australians and their connection to the country. Others questioned how Australia can acknowledge Indigenous peoples while also creating a sense of inclusion for everyone. Concerns were raised that framing groups as fundamentally separate can create a sense of “otherness” which, in some cases, may contribute to resentment.

Participants explored alternative ways of understanding belonging. One perspective offered was that everyone born in Australia is, in a sense, “of the country” because they are born from its soil and connected to the land. The challenge, from this viewpoint, is finding ways to live out a story in which all Australians can see themselves as belonging to the country while still recognising Indigenous history and culture. The discussion also considered how Australia presents itself to the rest of the world, noting that international audiences may increasingly notice tensions and divisions that are not always as visible to those living within Australia.

Recreation, Community and Australian Life

A separate theme focused on recreation and quality of life. Participants identified geographical access, sport, and recreational activities as important parts of Australian culture that help create balance in people's lives. These activities provide opportunities for connection, community participation, and wellbeing.

The discussion expanded into broader reflections on work and identity. One participant contrasted work-life balance with work-life integration, suggesting that Australians often resist defining themselves solely through their profession or productivity. Rather than introducing themselves through their job title,

Australians are more likely to identify with their passions, interests, and hobbies. Beyond practical access to recreation, there was a sense that Australians often question why life should be spent entirely in workplaces when there are so many opportunities to engage with the natural environment and community around them.

Participants also discussed the importance of having the freedom to leave situations, express views openly, and participate in community life. Concerns were raised about increasing surveillance and the growth of private education. Public education was described as an important generator of equality because it creates opportunities for people from different backgrounds to interact. Similarly, sporting clubs, music groups, and other community organisations were seen as important spaces where social connections and shared experiences can develop.

Uncertainty, Politics and the Future

The conversation then shifted towards broader political and economic challenges. Participants reflected on what some described as a political identity crisis, questioning whether Australia may be shifting towards more right-wing political attitudes. It was suggested that Australia does not exist in isolation and is increasingly affected by global tensions, conflicts, and political movements occurring elsewhere in the world.

Several participants described the current period as a time of global uncertainty and discomfort. While some people respond to these challenges with anxiety and uncertainty about what comes next, others maintain confidence that Australia will continue to adapt and navigate future challenges successfully.

Economic issues were also discussed, particularly the concentration and centralisation of wealth and capital. Participants raised concerns about housing, property structures, and policies such as negative gearing. There was a view that Australia faces significant structural challenges that will require collaborative solutions rather than individual responses.

Related concerns were raised about taxation, wealth distribution, and social mobility. One participant suggested that Australia may be moving backwards in some areas and questioned whether previous generations experienced opportunities that are becoming harder to access today. Others reflected on whether opportunities for decentralisation and reform may have existed in the past but are becoming increasingly difficult to achieve. Throughout the discussion, there was a recurring emphasis on the need to co-create solutions and think collectively about Australia's future.

Further Reflection Points

The discussions highlighted the complexity and contradictions that shape contemporary Australia. The tensions explored throughout the roundtable suggest fertile ground for continued dialogue.

- What could a shared Australian identity look like in fifty years' time, and who gets to shape that narrative?
- What would it take for Australia to become a global leader not only in ideas and research, but in translating those ideas into meaningful outcomes?
- What social institutions and community spaces will be most important for strengthening trust and social cohesion in an increasingly diverse society?
- How can younger generations be meaningfully involved in reimagining Australia's future?

- What values should guide Australia's responses to emerging global challenges, including technological change, economic uncertainty, and geopolitical instability?

These questions do not seek immediate resolution. Rather, they offer a starting point for ongoing inquiry and collective imagination, recognising that Australia's future identity will be shaped not by any single perspective, but through continued dialogue across differences and a shared willingness to envision new possibilities together.

Part 2: Co-creating for Generational Impact

Peak Efficiency and the Future

Participants reflected on the idea that society is currently living in a world of peak efficiency. Advances in technology, including artificial intelligence, are examples of removing inefficiency and waste from systems. One participant suggested that the last major disruption on the scale required to fundamentally reshape society was World War II. Since then, systems have increasingly been optimised for efficiency, leaving little room for experimentation, redundancy, or alternative possibilities.

This led to concerns about future generations. Participants noted that previous generations often viewed the future as a landscape of opportunity, whereas many people today are uncertain whether the next generation will enjoy the same possibilities. A key question raised was: what are we doing today to ensure young people have a future worth inheriting? Participants argued that society needs to move beyond conversations focused primarily on survival and self-interest towards thinking that is more collective and intergenerational.

One participant contrasted contemporary life with much of human history, suggesting that in the past, around 97% of people's time was devoted to the human experience—relationships, community, creativity, and meaning—while only 3% was devoted to economic and mechanical systems. Today, they argued, the balance has been reversed, with most people spending their lives serving systems that do little to enhance human flourishing.

The discussion also touched on differing approaches to artificial intelligence globally. One participant observed that some countries appear focused on building AI for the sake of innovation itself, while others focus more on specific tasks and applications. This raised broader questions about whether society has adequate ways of measuring human experience, wellbeing and flourishing, rather than simply measuring productivity and output.

Reimagining Value and the Economy

Participants argued that society has become highly successful at maximising production and efficiency, yet remains far below its potential when it comes to fully expressing human life. This led to discussion about the need for a reimagined human economy built around non-alienating systems that support people's wellbeing and sense of purpose.

Several participants suggested that Australians often value lifestyle more highly than pure economic achievement. Australia's geography and environment provide opportunities for recreation, leisure and quality of life, and people are often willing to invest in things that support that lifestyle. Participants contrasted this with more aggressive forms of capitalism, arguing that Australia has traditionally been less focused on relentless business growth and competition.

The conversation also explored different ways of perceiving success. One participant suggested that Australians often value the idea of “having a go” rather than measuring worth solely through financial success. They questioned assumptions that wealth automatically reflects merit, noting that many successful individuals benefited from circumstances, timing, or opportunity rather than solely personal effort. Concerns were raised that current systems are not operating with a strong sense of generational or social intent and are therefore failing to adequately serve people.

Participants discussed the relationship between ecology and economy, noting that the words themselves point towards interconnected responsibilities. Ecology was described as looking after the outside, while economy was described as looking after the household. When both are functioning well, people and communities can thrive. However, participants argued that a growing imbalance between ecological and economic priorities is causing systems to break down and leaving people behind.

Further discussion focused on how value is measured. One participant noted that GDP captures the value of goods and services exchanged in markets but fails to capture many of the most meaningful forms of human contribution. As an example, a parent spending time caring for their child contributes nothing directly to GDP, yet the impact on the child's development and wellbeing can be profound. Participants argued that what is currently measured does not reflect the totality of value that exists within society.

Alternative models were discussed, including more localised and distributed economic systems, time-based economies, and new ways of organising value creation within communities. Participants agreed that society needs to rethink not only how value is created, but how it is recognised and rewarded.

Human Capital, Story and Community

A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the importance of human capital. Participants suggested that modern societies often undervalue people while overvaluing material outputs and financial metrics.

One participant described story as a form of currency, arguing that narratives shape how people understand themselves and others. In toxic environments or abusive systems, a person's inherent value can easily be forgotten, leaving worth tied solely to productivity, achievement, or output. This distinction was compared to the difference between hardware and software. Infrastructure, buildings, and systems represent the hardware of society, while relationships, wellbeing, culture, and meaning represent the software. Participants argued that the latter is often overlooked despite being essential to human flourishing.

An example was shared about a culture where beads functioned as currency. During times of conflict, however, human capital was considered the most valuable resource. The death of even one person was enough to end a conflict because the community could not afford to lose human value. Participants reflected that contemporary societies often fail to view people through the same lens.

Further examples were discussed from cultures where community wellbeing was treated as a shared responsibility. If someone was unhappy, the wider group would seek to understand why and work collectively to address the issue. Participants contrasted this with current trends, noting concerns about declining happiness and wellbeing across Australia. Several suggested that many existing social and economic systems may be “past their use-by date” and no longer fit for purpose.

Participants also reflected on how people define themselves. While one participant had earlier argued that Australians tend not to define themselves by their profession, another noted that a common icebreaker remains, “What do you do?” They suggested replacing this with “What do you do with your time?” as a way of valuing people for more than their occupation. The discussion highlighted concerns that people increasingly evaluate one another through income, status, and location rather than character, interests, creativity, or contribution. Some participants also felt that society is becoming less sensitive to art, culture, and other non-economic forms of value.

Technology, AI and Human Capability

Technology was viewed as both an opportunity and a risk. Participants agreed that technology should help people explore new possibilities and expand human potential. However, concerns were raised about current AI models that operate within attention-driven systems, encouraging addiction, distraction, and increasingly isolated digital experiences. While AI has the potential to become a powerful human enabler, participants worried that some current applications may be moving in less constructive directions.

Several participants emphasised that having more technological capability does not necessarily mean spending more time in front of screens. Instead, technology should create opportunities for richer human experiences rather than replace them.

The education system was also discussed. One participant argued that schooling often fails to empower learners and instead reinforces constraints and compliance. Another suggested that Australian youth should be reading more, volunteering more, and thinking more intentionally about how they use their free time.

Participants also discussed philanthropy, arguing that while it can play an important role, it is not a sufficient solution to systemic social problems. Long-term change requires broader structural approaches rather than relying solely on charitable giving.

The conversation returned to AI through an example involving a student's decision not to use AI for an assessment. According to the participant, the student explained that there were many things he could do that AI could not. Despite others relying heavily on AI tools, he achieved the highest result. The story was used to illustrate the continuing importance of uniquely human capabilities and the need to work alongside AI rather than allowing it to replace human thinking. Participants emphasised the importance of co-creating with AI and shaping its role intentionally.

Possibility, Fear and Social Division

Participants explored the relationship between human capability and people's beliefs about what is possible. One perspective suggested that the greatest challenge is not simply helping people solve problems, but expanding their sense of possibility. Fear, conflict, scarcity and controversy can narrow people's thinking and reduce their capacity to imagine alternative futures.

Several participants argued that many people currently perceive the world through an extractive and short-term lens. Faced with uncertainty, some focus on taking what they can while opportunities remain available. This mindset can reduce collective thinking and weaken long-term planning.

The discussion highlighted the idea that people's actions are shaped by what they believe is possible. When public discourse becomes dominated by negativity, conflict, and division, the range of possibilities people can imagine becomes smaller. Participants argued that social fragmentation between different groups makes it increasingly difficult to create the conditions necessary for meaningful change.

Social media was identified as one contributor to this problem. Participants described it as a lens that can distort reality through information bias and selective exposure. Related concerns were raised about “tech colonialism” and the growing influence of technology on how people think, communicate, and make decisions. Participants argued that as AI becomes more deeply embedded in society, there is an urgent need to ensure it functions as an enabler rather than a destructive force.

Leadership, Governance and Collective Action

A significant portion of the discussion focused on government, leadership, and public decision-making. Some participants argued that governments increasingly function as administrators rather than leaders, relying heavily on consultants and external organisations for strategic thinking. Concerns were raised that outsourcing can reduce independent thinking and weaken long-term vision.

Examples were shared of extensive reports and recommendations being accepted by governments but then effectively ignored or buried. There was also discussion about strategic planning for the future. One participant reflected on an initiative that used particular metrics to determine whether councils were “fit for the future”.

While substantial resources were invested in evaluations and consultancy work, participants questioned whether these processes genuinely reflected evidence-based strategy. Concerns were raised that different consultants can often produce different answers, allowing decision-makers to justify predetermined outcomes.

Some participants expressed frustration with the growing influence of management consulting and private sector approaches within public systems. More broadly, there was a sense that politics is entering a period of instability and transformation. While existing systems remain competent at maintaining stability, participants questioned whether they are capable of genuine innovation.

Despite these concerns, there was also a strong emphasis on responsibility and collective action. Participants argued that solutions cannot be left solely to governments and institutions. Instead, communities, organisations, and individuals must participate in co-creating the future. Several suggested that periods of perceived failure may be necessary because they reveal the limitations of existing approaches and create opportunities for new ways of thinking.

Participants also reflected on the tendency for politics to shape blame and resentment. While such approaches can persist for long periods, there was a shared view that eventually people realise that blaming others rarely solves underlying problems.

Intergenerational Conversations and the Future

Towards the end of the discussion, participants highlighted the importance of intergenerational conversations. Bringing together different generations was seen as a significant opportunity to combine lived experience, perspective, technical knowledge, and emerging capabilities.

Participants stressed the need to retain and strengthen human capability rather than allowing technological or social systems to diminish it. They argued that difficult realities should not be ignored, but that people's perceptions of reality also shape how they respond to challenges.

Questions of responsibility were also raised. Australia was described as a relatively stable and comfortable country, largely insulated from many of the conflicts and disruptions affecting other parts of the world. While this stability is valuable, participants noted that it can also make change more difficult. Many people are understandably reluctant to sacrifice aspects of their quality of life today for benefits that may only be realised by future generations.

The discussion concluded with reflections on the importance of collective dialogue. Participants suggested that society has lost some of its capacity to come together for difficult conversations, share burdens

collectively, and interrogate complex issues. Creating spaces for honest discussion was viewed as essential if communities are to respond effectively to future challenges.

The final sentiment expressed was that change is already underway. The question is not whether transformation will occur, but how people choose to engage with it and what kind of future they will co-create together.

Further Reflection Points

As technological capability accelerates and systems become increasingly optimised for efficiency, there may be value in revisiting what constitutes progress, whose interests are being served and how human flourishing can remain at the centre of collective decision-making. Rather than assuming that existing institutions and measures of success will continue to meet future needs, participants highlighted the importance of imagination, agency, and shared responsibility in shaping what comes next.

- How can emerging technologies, including AI, be intentionally shaped to expand human potential rather than diminish human agency and connection?
- What uniquely human capabilities should future generations prioritise developing in an increasingly automated world?
- How can intergenerational responsibility become a more central consideration in political, economic and social decision-making?
- How might education evolve to cultivate creativity, discernment, purpose, and civic responsibility, rather than primarily preparing people to serve existing systems?

These questions invite a shift from reacting to change towards actively participating in its direction. Future dialogue may benefit from bringing together diverse voices to explore how to cultivate the values, relationships, and institutions needed to support a more future-oriented society.