

INTRODUCTION

In his iconic 1964 book, Donald Horne described Australia as ‘a lucky country run mainly by second-rate people who share its luck’. He went on to say that we ‘live on other people’s ideas’ and that ‘most of our leaders (in all fields) so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise’. His book caused a sensation at the time and became a runaway bestseller. The striking cover, an Albert Tucker painting of a sun-bronzed Aussie, appealed to the traditional Australian image of a country defined by its rural lands and their produce. The phrase ‘the lucky country’ quickly became part of the language, though its message was often misrepresented by people who had not even read the book, or had skimmed quickly through it and missed the irony of the title.

Donald Horne was a remarkable Australian. He grew up in a country town, but he moved with his parents to Sydney while he was at school. He began to study at the University of Sydney with the intention of becoming a teacher, but his formal education was interrupted when he was conscripted into the army during World War II. After the war he drifted through a brief dalliance with the diplomatic service into a career as a journalist, rising through the ranks to edit magazines. When it was

rumoured that he was about to be sacked from the editorship of *The Bulletin*, then a prominent publication, the University of New South Wales offered him a post in its Faculty of Arts. He became a prominent academic in the politics department, achieving the distinction of being promoted to professor without having even a bachelor degree! A few months before he died in 2005, the University of Sydney finally conferred an honorary Doctor of Letters on the man who was probably their most famous drop-out. Glyn Davis, now vice-chancellor of Melbourne University, who as an honours student was supervised by Horne, described him as ‘a familiar public intellectual in Australia, a man who helped the nation understand itself’. Davis observed that *The Lucky Country* ‘was both description and program ... calling for government to encourage the innovation missing from public and business life’. It resonated with the community because it was such a perceptive analysis of what is good about Australia, as well as what we could do better. Davis attributed the breadth of Horne’s understanding of Australia to the many roles he had filled: ‘student, soldier, diplomatic cadet, young journalist, editor, advertising executive, academic’. He was truly a unique individual.

Reflecting on the book’s reception 35 years after it was first published, Horne wrote about the way his argument had been misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented. He said, ‘misuse of the phrase “the lucky country”, as if it were praise for Australia rather than a warning, has been a tribute to the empty-mindedness of a mob of assorted public wafflers. When the book first came out, people had no doubt the phrase was ironic. Twisting it around to mean the opposite of what was intended has silenced the three loud warnings in the book about the future of Australia.’ The first of these three loud warnings was that it is essential to accept the challenges of where Australia

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sits on the map. These challenges include how we develop relationships with our Asian neighbours, with whom we have tended to engage on purely economic terms; how we reconcile our colonial history of dispossessing Australia's original inhabitants; and how we develop our foreign policy and defence strategies in the complex world of the Asia-Pacific, recognising the competing interests of the two great powers, China and the USA, as well as a significant group of middleweights like ourselves. Horne's second warning was the need for 'a bold redefinition of what the whole place adds up to now', which requires us to recognise that Australia has changed fundamentally in recent decades and have a serious public discussion about societal values, population growth and what kind of country we'd like to become. Obviously that process would be facilitated if we were to elect visionary leaders who were willing and able to guide, or at least participate in, the public discussion. His third warning saw a need for a revolution in economic priorities, 'especially by investing in education and science', which have been sacrificed in this country to privilege markets and the pursuit of endless growth, while we further tether ourselves to a globalised economy that puts our well-being in the hands of forces we can't control.

Writing in 1998, Horne observed that these same three warnings should be repeated, 'with the amplifying knob turned up'. If he were alive today, he would certainly think that the three warnings are still valid, more than 50 years after he originally issued them. In this book, I revisit these warnings to show you why they are still relevant today; if anything, they are more urgent because they have been neglected for 50 years by politicians content to drift with the random tides of international affairs. I am also compelled to add a warning of my own: the environmental challenges we face simply can no

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longer be ignored. Horne's three warnings – on geography, society and the economy – must all be filtered through the lens of our precarious environmental situation. The devastatingly extreme weather patterns that come with climate change, the loss of biodiversity, the breakdown of the Earth's ecosystems and our unsustainable use of finite resources all affect our future prospects.

In 2015, the need for change was signalled by a UN report on progress toward sustainability. It showed that Australia ranks 18th out of the 34 OECD countries: below the UK, New Zealand and well below Canada. The rating was based on 34 indicators covering economic, social and environmental progress. Australia ranked among the worst of all the affluent countries on such indicators as our level of resource use, the municipal waste we generate, the greenhouse gases we use for each unit of economic output and our obesity rate. We were also well below the average on social indicators such as the level of education we reach, the gender pay difference and percentage of women in parliament, economic indicators such as the poverty rate and the degree of inequality, as well as such environmental indicators as how much land we protect and our share of renewable energy. Perhaps most worrying, we are also well below average in our capacity to monitor progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. As the old adage goes, you can't manage what you don't measure.

While the global future looks extremely problematic, Australia has unique advantages that would allow us to be both a model for the developed world and a beacon of hope for the developing nations in our region. It will not be easy. What Horne acerbically called 'empty-minded public wafflers' remain an obstacle to achieving that desirable future, as do powerful vested interests and their political clients. I am an incurable

optimist and believe that the changes are possible; as the author Arundhati Roy enthusiastically expressed it, a new world is not just possible, but its early beginnings are already visible to the prepared senses: ‘on a quiet day, I can hear her breathing’. Like a small plant emerging from the earth, this new world needs to be nurtured – but the mighty Moreton Bay fig trees that are such an iconic part of the Queensland landscape were once tiny saplings. We must cultivate those seeds of change so we can grow to become a truly lucky country. That will be a wonderful legacy to future generations.

Let me tell you something of the background I bring to this book. That is important for you to know because I, like you and everyone else, see the world through the lenses of my values and my experience. Like Donald Horne, I grew up in small country towns. I was lucky to get a state bursary when I finished primary school, enabling my parents to send me to the state high school about 40 kilometres away and get a very good education. After finishing school, I got a job in Sydney working for a company that built electronic equipment; they supported me to study electrical engineering part-time at the new university of technology. Four years later, that institution had become the University of New South Wales and I moved to a job in its applied physics department, building equipment for researchers. Like Horne, I also learned to write by contributing to the student newspaper. I became heavily involved in student politics and in the years after *The Lucky Country* was published, I was active in the debates it stimulated about our geographic position, our responsibility for the treatment of the original Australians, our investment in education and science, and our rapidly changing urban societies. Unlike Horne, I was not moved by his arguments to support the American War in Vietnam.

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After graduating, I had the rewarding experience of ten weeks travelling around the USA with a group of 'student leaders' from nine other countries, meeting politicians and other decision-makers. A creative rearrangement of my return fare allowed me to visit Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Philippines on my way home, giving me a wonderful introduction to the variety and complexity of our region. I taught high school science for eighteen months, then went to the UK to research for a doctorate in physics at the University of York. Ironically, given where my thinking has moved since then, my doctoral research was funded by the UK Atomic Energy Authority! My first academic post was in the Technology Faculty at the new UK Open University. It involved working in multi-disciplinary teams to produce integrated learning experiences for mature-age students. After the publication of *The Limits to Growth* and the subsequent oil crisis in the 1970s, I became very interested in the issues arising from energy supply and use. I returned to Australia in 1980 to lecture in science, technology and society and direct the Science Policy Research Centre at Griffith University in Brisbane. As well as my academic work, I have been involved in a wide range of advisory roles to all levels of government, mostly in the broad areas of energy and environment. I directed our Commission for the Future in 1988, when we published an excellent discussion paper written by Donald Horne, arguing persuasively for government support for innovation. I chaired the advisory council that produced the first independent national report on the state of the environment in 1996. As the science we drew together showed clearly that we are not living sustainably, I became active in public discussion of the environmental problems. I negotiated early retirement from Griffith University at the end of 1999 and the university subsequently made me an emeritus professor, which

is an honorary appointment for life. This freed me to be more involved in other activities and led to me being invited to be president of the Australian Conservation Foundation, a role I filled from 2004 to 2014. I have given four addresses to the National Press Club about the need to change our approach and become an innovative society, in charge of our own destiny and working purposefully for a sustainable future.

Those of us who were born around the middle of last century in Australia were incredibly lucky in the lottery of life. We grew up in a time of peace and relative plenty in a secure country. But we need to recognise that there are now storm clouds on the horizon. We have a responsibility to future generations, our own descendants, to be thinking about our legacy to them. As I was writing this book, I became a grandfather for the first time. Looking at my precious little grand-daughter, I could not help reflecting on what sort of world she will grow up in. She could well live until the end of this century. I hope that we will act responsibly by putting in place the structures and policies that will allow her to have a secure, comfortable and rewarding life. So I have dedicated this book to her, and all of her generation of young Australians.

In writing this book I have assumed that you, the reader, are a thoughtful Australian who shares my view that we should be thinking about the future we are all creating. In this introduction, I have briefly set out the warnings Donald Horne sounded 50 years ago. In the following four sections, I will summarise what I believe to be the current situation and prospects for change in each of the key areas in turn: environment, geography, society and economy. Then I will conclude with some thoughts about combining these aspects of our life to shape a future that could be sustainable. I hope the discussion will help you in two ways. First, I believe we all need to understand how our individual

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actions can contribute to shaping a better future. Second, and more importantly, I believe we all need to be putting pressure on our elected representatives at all levels – local, state or territory, and national – to be acting more responsibly, taking the decisions and setting the structures now that will enable us as citizens to play our part in creating a genuinely lucky country.