Some Observations on the Greek-Australian Cultural Paradigm

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans cette étude nous analysons l'idéologie générale de la communauté intellectuelle et académique gréco-australienne et son inabilité de construire des symboles culturels concrets qui pourront exprimer la réalité sociale mixte dans laquelle elle vit.

Cette inabilité est comprehensible dans la formation des immigrants de l'après guerre qui arrivent en Ausrtalie après les années 50. Le conditionnement de leur grande majorité sous l'idéologie d'État du général Metaxas et de son discours nationaliste n'ont pas permis la politisation de l'identité individuelle et collective. Au contraire, la recherche d'identité greco-australienne était captive dans les grandes narrations de continuité nationale et plus spécifiquement dans l'insistance constante de l'héllénicité des Grecs contemporains. Le traumatisme de l'immigration n'est jamais devenu une force politique et a été restreint à la perception étroite d'une communauté qui s'est elle-même exclue en croyant à la supériorité de sa langue et de sa culture. Seulement peu de gens ont réussi à établir de nouvelles perceptions d'identité et conséquemment des symboles de reconnaissance collective. L'article se termine en mentionnant les facteurs politiques qui contribuent à l'immobilité créative de la communauté grecque-australienne et à l'absence d'une contre-proposition politique au paradigme culturel hégémonique anglo-celtique.

ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the general weltanschauung of the Greek Australian intellectual and academic community and their inability to construct concrete cultural symbols which would express the mixed social reality they live in. This inability is understood in the context of the post-war formation of immigrants who arrived to Australia after the 50's. The conditioning of the large majority of them under the state ideology of General Metaxas and his nationalistic discourse didn't allow the politicization of individual and collective identity. On the contrary, the Greek Australian quest for identity was trapped in the grand narratives of national continuity and more specifically in the constant insistence on the Hellenicity of modern Greeks. The trauma of immigration never became a political force and was restricted to the narrow perception of a self-excluded community which believed in the superiority of its language and its culture.

Only few people succeeded in establishing new perceptions of identity and therefore symbols of collective recognition. The paper ends by mentioning the political factors which contributed to the creative immobility of the Greek-Australian community and to the absence of a political counter-proposal to the hegemonical Anglo-Celtic cultural paradigm.

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During the last three decades, the Greek presence in Australia has been thoroughly investigated through a rather "antiquarian" kind of historical narrative. Hugh Gilchrist (Gilchrist, 1992 &1997) and to a certain extent Anastasios Tamis (Tamis, 1997), have formulated "grand narratives" about Greek immigration and constructed a certain image about its overall contribution to Australian civic life. However, the construction of such an image is based on typical representations of Greeks arriving in the new country and adjusting themselves to their new environment in a heroic or anti-heroic manner. The "epic discourse" can be easily detected in most literature written about Greeks arriving in Australia, whereas the anti-epic, parodic mode of representation can be seen in Gilchrist's "ironic" historical imagination (Hayden White, 1973: 45-80).

Nevertheless, these narratives have little or nothing to say about the self-perceptions of Greek immigrants who came to Australia and who had different social backgrounds, educational qualifications and work skills. Furthermore, no historian has described the codes of self-expression and self-understanding that some immigrants, intellectuals or not, employed in order to become visible and gain recognition in their new country. The history of the images used by many people to express their identity is completely missing from such historical "emplotments" (Hayden White, 1973: 7-11) and most probably it will be the main desideratum of every future attempt at presenting the Greek/Australian cultural paradigm. For example, icons of masculinity, femininity, sexual differentiation, ideological dissent and their respective codes of representation have not been analysed at all, but have remained hidden under the huge monolithic and monophonic abstract entity, labelled "Australian Greeks (Afstraliotes Hellenes)", (Kapardis & Tamis, 1988).

Usually, the Greeks in Australia have been perceived as conservative in their social mentality, moral issues and religious practices; and this is generally true. It seems that the main structures introduced in order to create networks of communication, functioned as perpetuators of pre-established patterns of behaviour. Ecclesiastical organisations, cultural associations and even political groupings all worked in a rather

regressive manner, reinforcing stereotypes and recreating certain images and forms of representations which remain dominant to this day. For the last fifty years or more, there has been a static way of representing Greek self and identity in Australia. This static image is based mainly on bipolar concepts about displacement (xenitia), and "my village" ("to chorio mou"), about now and then, "where I come from" and "where I live", indicating codes of representation which derive from traditional patterns of oral-folk culture in rural areas. However, even urban-originating Greeks have shown a striking hesitation in creating new images and symbols of identification relevant to the new environment and the conditions they have found themselves in.

Undoubtedly, there are historical reasons that account for such creative immobility. The great bulk of Greek immigrants came to Australia when Greece was in the process of building a homogeneous and unified nation-state. This does not simply refer to their educational, rural or urban background; historically, before their departure from the country, most of them were conditioned by the official ideology of the Greek State, as it was defined after the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922. Since the largest part of Greek immigration took place after the war, we must attribute the conservatism and stereoty-pical representation of identity to the ideology, verbal strategies and historical consciousness diffused by state apparatuses shortly before and after the war. The most persistent ideas of the Greek-Australian community are those of continuity with ancient Greek civilisation, a pathological emphasis on the European character of the Greeks and finally a strong belief in the world importance of Greek language and culture, a belief which on many occasions is translated into certainty about its superiority.

Certainly, all immigrants, the Irish, for example, or the Russians, employ similar defence mechanisms in order to cope with the strangeness and the unfamiliarity of their new environment. Through the eyes of nostalgia, the remote home and its history are transformed into an ideal paradise lost and, usually, the new home is seen as something temporary, transient, and almost without concrete reality. The discourse, which expresses such nostalgic reinvention of the past, is heavily emotional and deeply personal; it is always full of allusions to

that ideal "there", "then" and "once upon a time". The structure of this discourse is essentially based on fairy tale motifs, on morphological patterns which function not simply as reminders but as reinforcements of a deeply felt emotional reality, the reality of absent identity and dismantled selfhood.

It has been a standard practice of many scholars to debunk and demythologise such idealised versions of the past, especially in their collective function as cohesive strategies for people who feel displaced. However, such "demythologisation" does not present a viable alternative discourse that could counterbalance deeply experienced feelings of loss, absence and exile. Discourses are verbal strategies for coping with the challenges of reality and, at the same time, structures upon which individuals build their own identity. Whereas the primary material of historical experience can be seen as chaotic, at the same time it is obvious that similar discourses and patterns of self-representation are not relevant to the new social realities, and do not express the complexity and the singularity in which the immigrants found themselves.

New discourses have to be invented or re-invented in order to express the "newness" of the surrounding social reality. Otherwise, individual selves without objective references to the psychodynamics of their social ambience are formed in an intellectual, emotional and existential vacuum. What comes out in the end is a fragmented identity, in fact a non-identifiable lexical categorisation which functions in an absolute semantic void. Such a void is superficially filled with wealth and possessions which simply exacerbate the feeling of an absent fulfilment. Thus, useable simulations that can be sold as useful generalisations replace complete images of self-representation. Typical thought-patterns emanating from such fragmented identities are the following: "If I am not myself, I become myself because I am Greek"; "my Greekness makes my life meaningful" and so on. Individuals are dichotomised between two realities, the actual and the imaginary, and remain unable to unify both and make their personal Imaginary a project for collective realisation as well. Such dichotomy persists because of various traditionalist practices and ideologies privileged by Greek-Australian intellectuals in order to offer some sort of emotional compensation to traumatised immigrants.

On the other hand, shortly after their settlement the Greeks created extensive networks of social support, either ecclesiastical or cultural and political; and yet these organisations and their leadership didn't make any efforts to create new images, symbols and forms of expressing the Greek-Australian experience in its cultural multiplicity and existential variety. Individuals change; so do discourses that allow them to frame experience, textualise it, and thus give meaning to their actuality. During the 20's and 30's, the "oldest & most influential Greek newspaper in the Southern hemisphere", as it presented itself, the National Tribune, had as subtitle, the following dictum by its founder Leon Bizannes: "A Greek must always remain a good Greek, because you cannot make a good Australian out of a bad Greek! Australia has nothing to doubt or be afraid of the man who loves two countries; the real danger lies in the man who loves none!" (National Tribune, 4 March 1936). In this charming expression we can detect the gradual co-existence of two different mental categories, united by a moral imperative: goodness is supranational and therefore a good Greek is a good Australian. Moral character makes people citizens and agents for social interaction.

There is a remarkable difference in the discursive practices of Greek Australian newspapers before and after World War II. Although this is an issue still to be better researched in the future, with parallel studies of other cultural manifestations organised during the same period, there is an almost cosmopolitan image depicted, especially by the National Tribune; next to the news from Greece, there is a large section mainly of international affairs and a smaller one on local activities. Given the four pages of the large format newspaper of the time, the overall picture presents a rather extroverted editorial perspective, definitely monocultural and monolingual but with an international outlook. Certainly, the historical events of the 30's were of extreme interest; the choice of those events signifies an editorial strategy that tries to see the Greek presence in Australia as part of a growing internationalisation of politics.

Most immigrants who arrived in Australia after the war had experienced the traumatic realities of political unrest, German occupation

and Civil War. The inter-war period in Greece, as much as in other European countries, was characterised by the fierce ideological struggle between fascism and communism, with liberal democracy playing the intermediate role. The Greek political spectrum was deeply polarised during this period, which ended in 1936 with the imposition of a strange dictatorship under General Ioannis Metaxas (1936-1941). Metaxas was a paradoxical and self-contradictory figure, who established a quasi-fascist regime with a pro-English and pro-liberal democratic orientation. At the same time, the official ideology of the state was mainly focused on a supposed Third Hellenic Civilisation, a Hellenic-Christian Reich, which was a mixture of Byzantine autocracy and Hellenic culture, without, of course, any allusion to the Athenian democracy.

State apparatuses, mainly as anti-communist propaganda, disseminated this bizarre ideology. Many would-be communists were conditioned by such an incongruous amalgamation of two distinct cultural configurations, thus developing a strongly nationalistic, but not political or civil sense of identity. During the 40's such ideological conditioning remained the main strategy for constructing subjectivity and a critical theme of the overall political culture in Greece. Many supposedly internationalist communists were moulded by similar idealistic abstractions in a self-assuring way, without questioning the dissimilarity of their actual political consciousness from the nationalistic philosophy of history behind the state ideology. This strange and unnoticed contradiction was imported to the Greek Australian community from the early period of its mass settlement during the 50's.

To this day, in most Greek-Australian communities, there is a strange symbiotic relationship between religion and political ideology, which is both interesting and worthy of study. It is a symbiotic relationship, which has led to unexpected conflicts and power struggles that survive to this day. Many communist organisations advocate austere forms of Greek Orthodoxy without any theological or ecclesiological knowledge. Thus, political and religious affiliation has become a defence mechanism of self-preservation and, to a certain extent, of personal valorisation. However, such a sense of personal self-impor-

tance always refers to the situation back home, where the communists fought against the Germans and who, despite their self-sacrifice and brave resistance, were persecuted after the war. In this respect, communist ideology functions as a cult of the underdog, of the persecuted outcast, and becomes a sentimental response to the challenges of the society. At its best, such emotionalism develops into emotional humanism and, at its worst, into narcissistic self-exclusion. Thus, with few individual exceptions, until the sixties there was no explicit policy for incorporating the political societies of Greek immigrants into the existing political forces of the Australian society.

On the contrary, most political organisations remained isolated, almost insulated, from every contact with the political debate in the host country and retained their attachment to what was happening "back home". Most of the Greek-Australian press of the last 40 years reported (usually in its front pages) on the political situation in Greece and the "national questions" of Cyprus, the Aegean and, more recently, Macedonia. The 1967-74 Dictatorship contributed to such special attachment. During this period, the Greek-Australian community tried unsuccessfully to re-define its political image but again fell back on the usual stereotypes. Even then, it became completely impossible to develop a political identity based on the new realities. Consequently, the possibility of a civil identity based on the reality of the Australian society became increasingly remote.

The main point of reference for most political debates continued to be the post-Civil War situation, with the spectacular absence of every other historical period. As a matter of fact, a fictionalised version of the Greek Civil War has become, to this day, the main myth used to promote historical awareness in younger generations. As late as 1997, one of the worst written books of contemporary Greek pulp fiction, Do you remember, father... by Nikos Kolovos, an actor turned writer, is taught to High School students in order to receive their final degree. The book, an artless and plotless depiction of the Greek Civil War, has received no critical attention whatsoever, because it is written in a highly ingoistic, one-sided and parochial style. At the same time, it is full of dialectical idioms, which increase the difficulty of textual analy-

sis to the bewilderment of students and teachers alike. Most of them are unable to comprehend either the literary value of the book or its contemporaty relevance.

Similar images of "home" were reinforced by the projection of a pristine, unadulterated and pure Greece, as seen in several films, such as *Never on Sunday* and *Zorba the Greek*. The music of those films, together with a highly idealised version of the rebetika songs, has remained constant proofs of Greekness and popular culture. The marginal rebetika sub-culture of drug-addicts, prostitutes and criminals, sanitised and purged of its negativity, became a slogan for ideological conformity: whoever didn't like rebetika stood up against the people and was definitely anti-Greek. At the same time, motifs from high culture were popularised; in particular, motifs from the work of Nobel Laureate poet Giorgos Seferis (1900-1971) in whose poetry the Aegean landscape and the modernist historical sense were the symbols of a perennial Volksgeist.

The return to Australia of the Johnston family in 1964, whose experiences from their life on Greek islands became popular through their novels, perpetuated such images of Greekness well into the next decade. The work of Martin Johnston almost de-historicised Greek experience; through its intense "literaliness", Martin Johnston's poetry and prose monumentalised the so-called popular/folk tradition of Greece against the background of an incomprehensible political reality. Johnston himself tells us about the impact of reading Greek folk songs: "... one memorable evening I read to an audience of two thousand Greeks who had gathered in Sydney, Australia to protest against the Junta, and who sat there frozen with emotion, many of them weeping, at this vital part of themselves being given back to them; improbably enough, by a long-haired, hippy-looking Australian, in an outlandish accent, but still in their own language, of which these poems are one of the glories" (Johnston, 1993:128).

In this passage, Johnston discreetly talks about the deep connection between language and identity, which obsesses the Greek Australian community to this day. Language has become one of the main ideo-

logical instruments of maintaining both the "spirit" of Greece and the distinct position of the Greeks throughout history. Furthermore, despite the fact that most Australian Greeks born in the 70's and 80's are mainly English speaking, the educational philosophy and the over-all social culture of the community still remain predominantly focused on Greek language as the only way of maintaining Greek identity. The theory of the superiority of Greek language is constantly emphasised by many Greek visiting professors, who express the linguistically unsound idea that whereas every Greek word borrowed by other lan-guages vividly proves the importance of the Greek language, yet every foreign word introduced to the Greek language is a corruption and bastardisation.

At the same time, the image of Australia as "bleak displacement" persists even by people who live well adjusted to the Australian soci-ety. In Images of Home, Effy Alexakis and Leonard Janiszewski reaf-firm the "suspended" identity of Greek-Australians who still see the country as "mavri xenitia" (Alexakis & Janiszewski, 1995: 8). Even the most important poet of Greek-Australian sensitivity, Antigone Kefala, despite her deeply universal humanist vision of existential solidarity, records the imagery of an alien and absent reality; her collected works are indicatively entitled "Absence", and in them we see a Kafkaesque fragmented and disembodied sense of identity: "Growing old in these streets / gathering this knowledge one / does not want, one can not use, / a useless knowledge that / repeats itself. / The same ashen faces, / the same fear / voices over the telephone / talking to soups / in this everyday that continues / to unfold in our absence" (Kefala, 1992: 156). The difference between her vision and that of another poet of the Diaspora, the Alexandrian C.P. Cavafy, "The City", is a solid indi-cation of how differently the personal Imaginary can be externalised under analogous conditions of social alienation, due either to ethni-city or sexuality.

Alternative images have been proposed only from the so-called mar-gins of literary and social legitimacy. Komninos and P.O. remain the poets who, through the modes of oral and performance poetry created at least a different depiction of their personal identity and poetic

vision. They express the healthy negativity and ethical rebellion against the pretentious decency and false morality of any social and ideological bourgeoisie, irrespective of ethnic origin. P.O. in his surprisingly short poem, "is not greek" expresses this gradual separation from a self-perception made elsewhere by others on his behalf: " i remember the ship we came out. / i remember arriving at a cast iron gate. / i remember the first day at school (all the kids / laughed at me: from my true to life / greek haircut). / i took 2 years accordion lessons, rather than / learn greek. every greek i met, told me, i was greek. / greek kids like me / hate other greek kids like me. (Athena / my sister is now like this). all the time: the Greek: "did this", the Greeks: / "did that", the Greeks, the Greeks, / FUCK THE GREEKS! whack! (P.O., 1981: 8).

Komninos depicts another vision of belonging to the new country through diversity: "so, / i talk about my greek mum, / and my greek dad, / and my fish and chip shop. / but fuck. / that's my life / what do you want me to do / read poems about leprechauns, / panel vans / or fairies. / what do i have to do to convince you guys / i'm an australian poet" (Komninos: 1985: 30-31). The de-capitalisation of ideologically charged terms, such as "i", "greek", "australian", signifies the death of essentialist concepts of identity and origin; thus similar collective concepts become a quest rather than a certainty; a cultural end in itself rather than an ideological appellation enforced by grammatical categories. Thanks to such voices, the problematics of personal identity and integrated self emerge as central issues of collective representations. With Komninos and P.O., we come to the realisation of a new Imaginary congealing itself through the interaction of self and society, a new political self that consists of multiplicities and polyphonies.

However, mainstream mentality has not allowed the development of an important osmosis between cultures, through translations or bilingual publications. Major literary works of Australian literature, even the works of a staunch philhellene writer such as Patrick White, have not been translated into Greek and no educational or cultural institution has undertaken the task of a serious presentation of the Australian

"core-culture" (Dixson, 1999: 6-8) to Greek-Australians. On the other hand, the Greek-Australian press added an English section only during the mid 80's, a section, which constantly increases in length, since cable and satellite TV-channels have made contact with Greece proper a daily convenience.

In conclusion, we must state that Greek-Australian intellectuals, especially after the 50's, failed to formulate and propose a cultural alternative, following the changes in perceptions and representations of identity which occurred within the Australian society and the Greek state. The dominant philosophy for culture and education has been one of conservation and perpetuation of already obsolete patterns of self representation that remain alive because of a right-wing regressive mentality quite frequently expressed in left-wing phraseology. The Greek Australian intellectual and academic community has been unable to transform its representational codes and symbolic images, together with its systems of cultural semeiosis under the changing conditions of post-national identity. It has remained centred on ideas of nation-statehood, despite the structural changes in capitalism in both Australia and Greece, which have gradually abandoned the nation as a mental framework and political strategy.

Because of this, the Greek-Australian intellectual community has been unsuccessful in going beyond the horizon of national, or even nationalistic theories of selfhood and personality. Most intellectuals and academics insist on essentialist concepts of individuality and nationhood, and completely disregard the bi-cultural and poly-ethnic realities of the Australian society that define and frame individual self-realisation. The fragmented proposals we have seen so far are not of existential nature; they are predominantly ideological and romanti-cised, religious in their fanaticism and non-political because of their "closed" and regressive character.

The cultural paradigm of the Greek-Australian community has failed to follow the deep structural transformations that have occurred in Greece proper and, indeed, all over Europe, after the European Unification and the immanent monetary amalgamation. It has failed

to incorporate the postulate of a post-national identity, as defined by post-marxist theory and existential philosophy. Thus, the Greek-Australian community remains invisible and, therefore, without recognition and self-recognition at the same time. Moreover, by insisting on folkloric and picturesque images, the community is not empowered to challenge the Anglo-Celtic intellectual domination; folkloric images simply de-historicise and de-materialise subjectivities and collectivities alike.

Therefore, the cultural paradigm of the Anglo-Celtic mainstream majority remains in power because it has not been successfully challenged by any other cultural counter-paradigm with different strategies of identity building. In our case, the Greek-Australian community has completely neutralised its own creative Imaginary in order to produce "images of nowness" that would propose an alternative view of civil or political identity, beyond the restrictions of the ideal nation-state as experienced decades ago. From a psychoanalytic point of view, this accounts for the ideological infantilism that can be easily detected in most disputes in which the Greek-Australian has been involved, ie. the Macedonian Dispute, which was focused on the Greekness of Alexander the Great and his troops, without reference to the wider picture of "history wars" that take place throughout Europe.

The problem of defining post-national identity is still under discussion. A working hypothesis might be Martin J. Matustik's who has suggested a definition which offers flexibility and challenges established ideas: "postnational identity cannot be[...] confused with some ethnic cleansing in either its global or regional forms. On the contrary, because I project this notion, in principle, as a positionality of concretely existing individuals, each in their multicultural diversity, I seek an expression for our communal and individual resistance to oppressive homogeneity. Kierkergaard's category of the individual, not a communitarian or nation-state ethos, is the most radical, and to be sure nonatomistic, expansion of multiple or open unity in difference. With this category, we can rethink democratic multiculturalism from the most extreme standpoint of diversity (self-realisation) while still making moral and sociopolitical uses of identity and responsible

agency (self-determination). We can envision this individual as a citizen in democratic spaces of multicultural and multigendered positionalities" (Matustik, 1993: viii-ix).

Similar projects have never been put forward by the Greek Australian academic and intellectual communities. On the contrary, the dominant discourse remains trapped in the self-agrandisement of the "glory that was Greece", and stagnated in pre-political or de-politicising constructs. Kallithea Bellou notes that "for the second generation Greeks, Greek identity is a number of things but, above everything else, is maintenance of Greek language, culture and religion, continuing contact with the Greek-Australian environment as well as the close family ties" (Bellou, 1993: 233). As a result of such closed and almost "tribal" mentality, racist and sectarian notions that simply disguise the absence of concrete cultural realisations have frequently effaced individual identity. Patrick White in his own distinct way posed the same question: "Australia will never acquire a national identity until enough individual Australians acquire identities of their own. It is a question of spiritual values and must come from within before it can convince and influence others. Then, when our individual identities, united in one aim, cluster together like a swarm of instinctively productive bees -as opposed to that other, coldly scientific, molecular cluster- we may succeed in achieving positive results" (Patrick White, 1989: 114).

White's statement indicates the serious conflict between abstract generalisations (nation, community, party, Greek) and the actual realisation of such projects, about the creation of integrated personalities and individuals with self-respect and self-recognition. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of personal choice for the individual in order to participate with the surrounding community. As Julia Kristeva has pointed out "beyond the origins that have assigned to us biological identity papers and a linguistic, religious, social, political, historical place, the freedom of contemporary individuals may be gauged according to their ability to choose their membership, while the democratic capability of a nation and social group is revealed by the right it affords individuals to exercise that choice" (Kristeva, 1993:16).

However, even the most superficial reading of present day Greek press in New South Wales shows that in their editorials or letters to the editor, the main issues raised remain the same, ie, the continuity of Hellenic civilisation, the Hellenicity of the Greeks and the repetitive motifs of a bygone, happy village life. Such archaisms persist not simply because of their market currency, but because they represent permanent symbols of identification of an intellectually acephalous community, which masks its own political aphonia behind negative images of the Other and hostile depictions of contemporary politics.

Unfortunately, vested interests of various groups and individuals are still very strong and the whole business of patriotism is too pro-fitable to be able to envisage a different cultural statement for the near future produced by the Greek Australian community. External disruptions, such as ideologically conservative institutions established by the Greek State and appropriated by a large number of individuals selling "patriotism" and "Greekness", confuse the process of individual integration and collective incorporation into the Australian society. By stressing the "glorious past", the "malicious questioning of the Hellenicity of Modern Greeks" and thus promoting the racist agenda of cultural separatism, these institutions transform the future into "a foreign country"; indeed, how things will develop is another interesting question still asking for an answer.

In the recent film about Greek-Australian experience by Anna Kokkinos, entitled *Head On* (1998), the main male character, confused by the complexities of his bicultural character, his homosexuality, and his family, throws himself into a whirlwind of a cultural vertigo. Suspended between a Greece he has never seen, and the city of Melbourne which he lives in, he becomes oblivious of the only reality that makes him be who he is: his body. By forgetting his body, he can not experience the fulfilment and self-integration of his actuality; he transfers himself into the de-territorialised realm of shadows, where his own identity becomes another illusion. His inability to accept his twofold identity, the external family pressures to be Greek and nothing else, destroys the possibility of a balance between his desire and his positionality. Probably the quest for such balance should become

the new problematic of cultural theory within and without Australia in the future.

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