

# EIGHTY-EIGHT Bicentennial Viewpoints

**A year of mourning — or a missed opportunity?  
What does 1988 mean to you? We asked eight  
people, some well-known, some less well-known,  
for their opinions.**

## **Humphrey McQueen** Historian and author

Just as a marriage which celebrates only its anniversaries is dead, a people who expect centenarians to replenish their self-esteem have lost the confidence to make history anew. The best way to celebrate Australia's bicentennial is to establish our independence.

In practice, that means closing the US bases at North-West Cape, Pine Gap and Nurrungar, as well as imposing minimum prices on coal, bauxite and iron ore sold to Japanese conglomerates. If we can achieve either of those ends during 1988, next year would indeed be a cause for fireworks.

While it is monstrous to celebrate 1988 as the anniversary of the start of the destruction of Aboriginal society, many other activities are worthy of notice — for instance, the struggle against transportation, for elected government, the defeat of conscription, victory in the anti-fascist wars, and rejection of the Communist Party Dissolution Bill. Each locality and community will have its own particular struggles to rethink — from the Castle Hill Rebellion of 1804 to the Wonthaggi miners' strike of 1934.

Nor should the Anglo-Saxon contribution be forgotten by marxists. Our analysis of capital depended on Engels' and Marx's freedom to write about British developments. Since then we have benefited from the intellectual and moral contributions of William Morris, Maurice Dobb, Christopher

Hill, Edward Thompson and Juliet Mitchell.

If we recall such events and people as inspiration and guides in our current activities, 1988 need not be a year of shame.



**Tiga Bayles**  
Sydney Radio Redfern

Like a lot of black people I view the Bicentenary basically as an opportunity for the "education of a nation". It's like a mirror we can hold up to the rest of the world. And it's up to Aboriginal people to project things into that mirror — leprosy, hepatitis and other health problems for black people, black deaths in custody, our treatment by the police. We can use the Bicentenary to actually change attitudes in politics — to really make a difference in what people think.

In a way it's a good thing that it's happened: it's presented Aboriginal people with an opportunity we wouldn't otherwise

have had, and it's up to us to use it. We should make it a time of contemplation rather than celebration — a time for people to look closely at society and its shortcomings. Aboriginal people can have strong feelings about what it is we're supposed to be celebrating, and still use the year to achieve positive aims and get a positive message across.



**Jack Mundy**  
Sydney City  
Councillor-in-exile

There isn't any way that white Australians (particularly those of Anglo-Saxon origin) could justifiably engage in so-called celebration to mark two hundred years of white colonisation of this continent.

The fact that many of the first people to arrive here after 1788 were convicts doesn't change matters much because, when they were freed, ex-convicts were as ruthless in their attitudes and conduct towards Black people as non-convicts.

Surely the best we could hope of 1988 is that there could be a new beginning; that full land rights be granted to Aboriginal people; and that the equality of all be recognised as a national goal. Yet the political reality is that these aims are highly unlikely to be achieved. The country's political climate is still very conservative, with the two major political forces appearing to differ very little from one another.

The hard cold fact is that both racism and sexism are evident across the country, and still need to be fought in the national consciousness by all progressive people.

Instead of celebrating, maybe

we should soberly view the tragedies committed against Black people, mourn them, and pledge, as enlightened people, to continue to fight racial discrimination against Black people throughout Australia.

1988 should be a year of shame, yet also a year of action against racism.



**Michael Kirby**  
President  
NSW Court of Appeal

**The easy thing to do with a challenge is to put it into the too hard basket or ignore it or react aggressively to it. More difficult is to turn a challenge into an opportunity.**

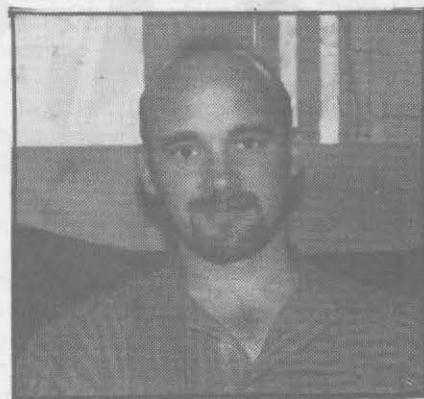
The Australian Bicentenary offends some sensitive Australians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. They regard it as an event to mourn, not celebrate. On the other hand, most people reading *ALR* would not be here but for the events which the Bicentenary commemorates. Accepting that reality, we should turn the Bicentenary into a reflection on history: both our successes and failures.

Our most glaring failure as a nation, relevant to the Bicentenary, has been the relationship established between the newcomers and the indigenous people of the continent. The Bicentenary should therefore be the impetus to a new era of economic, cultural, linguistic, legal and political rights for Aboriginal Australians.

When they open the new Parliament House in Canberra — with or without prayers — it would



be my hope that in the presence of the Queen of Australia, all the Senators and all the Members of the House of Representatives, the proceedings should start with an affirmation of the unanimous resolve of the Australian people to do much better on this issue in the century ahead. Let there be parties and celebrations. Most Australians like such things. But let the Bicentenary also be an event for sombre and constructive self criticism and resolve about action in the future.



**Colin Mercer**  
Cultural Studies Lecturer  
Griffith University

**Living in Brisbane means that we'll get a double dose in 1988. The Bicentenary and the Expo. And now that the "black hole" detention cells are to be closed down, where is the new-look government of Mike Ahern going to put all those troublemakers from the Aboriginal community who threaten to disrupt the Expo?**

*Critical engagement* will be my motto. *Critical* in that the

Bicentenary offers an opportunity to publicise some of these massive injustices, to embarrass federal and state governments into action and — this is the *engagement* part — at the same time constructively to propose new and more democratic configurations of "Australianness". If we confine ourselves to just the first of those activities, then we are achieving nothing more than a sort of left-liberal condescension to what will undoubtedly be a popular event. We can ignore all the hype and re-enactment fervour — except where they offer the opportunity for significant public protest and engagement — and get stuck in, where we can, in schools, community programs, universities, workplaces, local government, to make our own contribution to the critical redefinition of both the past two hundred years and the coming period. If those definitions are left in the hands of the hype-merchants and the agencies of an "official culture", then we will be partly to blame for whatever consolidated, short-sighted and self-congratulatory image of Australia might emerge from the Bicentenary.

If we miss this opportunity critically to engage in areas such as "national memory", "national identity" and "national character, or, more locally in the areas of community, lifestyle and neighbourhood, recognising the effects that these forms have on our political cultures and in the realm of "hearts and minds", then we will have proved once again that, in the name of some abstract and higher principle, we can't see the wood for the trees.

**Kath Walker**  
Poet and writer

**I am not celebrating. I don't give a stuff for Expo, or the Bicentenary. I've picked up the blood money because for the last two hundred years that is all we have been given by the white people, and I will use it to the best of my ability. As for the Bicentenary, we have been here for 100,000 years. Compare that with your piddling two hundred.**