Richard Glover in the *Sydney Morning Herald* which served not only to pour scorn on the family involved, but also to profile one of the runners-up in the lucky family stakes, a multicultural bunch of academics and artists. It wasn’t that this family was more typical, argued Glover. Rather, they should have been chosen because they would have made for better PR in the UK.

Then came the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympic Games. I watched this with a group of people who all oohhked and ahhhed at every slice of pyrotechnics, while simultaneously getting their knickers in a knot about what sort of tacky ceremony Sydney would put on if it wins the 2000 Olympics. The Spanish had Culture and History coursing through their veins instead of blood, they said, whereas Sydney would undoubtedly fall back on a parade of 20-foot tall cuddly koalas or something equally tacky.

Now, I lived in Barcelona for over a year in the mid-80s and can testify that the cultural pursuits of the average male Spaniard (or Catalan, if you prefer) frequently don’t extend much beyond football, the bullfights, Madonna and the latest kick-boxing movie. Even my revealing that the whole Barcelona shebang had been choreographed by an Australian did little to arrest this particular bout of hand-wringing.

The third factor reveals what is essentially the other side of the same coin. As a writer and sub-editor for various rock music magazines I became used to receiving letters from readers imploring us to ignore what went on overseas on the grounds that Australia produced the best, most honest and no-bullshit rock bands on the planet, and that everything else was just a bunch of foreign nancies prancing around diverting the minds of young Australians from this incontrovertible fact. This attitude hit its apogee with a recent series of showcase gigs in Los Angeles by Australian bands.

Dubbed ‘The Wizards of Oz’, and funded by taxpayers’ dollars, it saw something like ten Australian groups flown to LA at considerable expense in order to play in front of American record company executives. Invitations were issued to said executives imploring them to come to the gigs—not on the grounds that these were exciting bands that would make them lots of money but, rather, on the fact that they were from Australia. I don’t know about you, but I don’t give a flying fox where music comes from as long as it’s good; Australia does indeed produce many fine artists, but I’m far from convinced that geography is any sort of decisive factor. The Americans, largely baffled by the whole marketing exercise and treating it as something of a joke, apparently agreed and largely stayed at home. I’m all for government supporting the local music industry, but can’t help wondering if some better way couldn’t have been found to spend my money.

What all this reveals is a self-consciousness about nationality and identity that’s proving incredibly durable. To many Australians—and this seems to be an attitude far more prevalent among those born in this country than among recent migrants—art and culture from this country is either intrinsically inferior to anything overseas or it’s above criticism simply because it’s home-grown.

Personally, I think that the idea of a republic and the removal of the Union Jack from the Australian flag are both long overdue, but I have my doubts as to whether they’ll do anything to alleviate the cultural cringe. That will happen only when we accept ourselves simply as we are, a diverse nation with its own cultural institutions that are no better and no worse than any other country’s, only different. In the meantime, our frequently crippling self-consciousness will keep the old beast alive and kicking for a good few years yet.

**Stuart Hitchings** is a Sydney freelance journalist whose toes steadfastly refuse to curl while watching *Sylvania Waters*. 

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**Cringe Politics**

Gough Whitlam’s election in 1972 was supposed to see it off forever. The Bicentenary in 1988 was to be its death knell. Keating’s plans for a republic and a new flag have similar aspirations. But despite the best efforts of our finest political and artistic minds that peculiarly Australian phenomenon, the cultural cringe, steadfastly refuses to roll over and play dead.

A series of recent occurrences tells the tale. First up we had the controversy over the ABC’s ‘reality soap’ *Sylvania Waters*. When this telling little slice of supposed real life hit the small screen a couple of months back what was most interesting about it wasn’t the program itself, but the round of anguished hand-wringing that ensued. “Oh my God, whatever will they think of us overseas?” seemed to be the most common reaction, especially on the ABC itself. Andrew Olle and Margaret Throsby’s 2BL programs were full of ‘experts’ and listeners all bemoaning the damage they thought the program would do to our ‘national image’, especially in Britain—as if this were something that rested entirely on the domestic minutiae of one family.

Of course, a lot of it came down to pure snobbery, and nowhere was that better illustrated than in an extraordinary front page piece by...