



An introductory discussion starter for **The Australian Nation learning circle**

**THE DISCOVERING DEMOCRACY PROGRAMME**

Learning circles are based on the idea that everyone has something to contribute.

**The purpose of this discussion starter**

This starter has been developed to promote small group discussion about some of the important issues facing Australia today. The starter provides a sample of some of the issues that are discussed in 'The Australian Nation' learning circle. It is hoped that some groups will go on to use the learning circle and it is intended to give small groups of people the opportunity to:

- develop an insight into some of the subject material of 'The Australian Nation' learning circle. It does this by offering you the chance to discuss what it means to be an Australian, consider different views about our history and look at immigration in Australia. Other topics covered in the learning circle include Australian politics and Australia's place in the world.
- follow the group discussion method which the learning circle uses. This should allow groups to make an informed decision about whether they would like to form a learning circle group, using the kit 'The Australian Nation'. You may also be interested in the companion learning circle kit 'Citizens and Public Life' (see back page for details).

**How to use the starter**

You can use this starter in whatever way works for your group, but it is important that everyone has a chance to read it before the meeting. Maybe make some photocopies and share them around. When people have had a chance to read the starter hold a meeting to discuss the issues. Included throughout the starter are a number of discussion questions. Use any or all of these to help you focus on the issues as they apply to your group.

The length of your discussion is up to you. Most groups will meet for anywhere between 40 minutes and two hours. You can help people who don't read well by talking about the information with them before the group discussion begins.

**Talk doesn't have to be cheap**

This starter provides a sample of the many issues that are relevant to any discussion about Australia. It will assist in stimulating an entertaining, informative and productive discussion.

Talking about issues with peers, friends, family and work-mates is fun and is also a useful way to become involved with issues. Everyone can take part in this sort of discussion and many people get a lot of their information in this way. Before we had television this type of informal discussion was much more common than it is today.

Learning does not only occur in formal education practices. Informal settings for learning are equally important and can include families, friends, community groups, workplaces and social action initiatives.

*Rick Flowers, Social Justice Leadership and Popular Education, In Adult Learning Australia, no. 3 June 1999.*



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## Some ground rules for your discussion

There are a number of ground rules for your discussion, which you should follow. This will make the discussion more productive. Take a minute at the start of your discussion to make sure every one understands them.

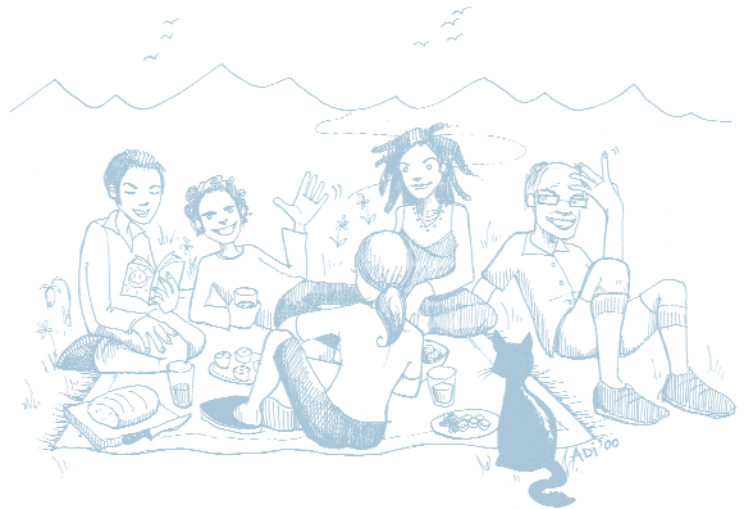
- Listen carefully and respectfully to the opinions and beliefs of all others – even those you disagree with.
- Examine in an open manner your own views on the issue – even those which you have long held. Being open like this will encourage others.
- See if you can draw out quiet people and give them the opportunity to speak. Perhaps ask their opinion, but respect their right to be quiet.
- People who tend to speak up a lot in groups need to make an effort not to dominate.
- Don't expect that everyone will necessarily agree. Don't try and smother disagreement, acknowledge it and move on; you may go back to it later.
- Value all opinions, ask clarifying questions and be prepared to learn from others.

## What makes us Australian?

There are many different views about the Australian nation. We all have a view about what it means to be Australian and what makes us different from other nations. But was there a single event, a 'coming of age' or a tradition that drew us together as a nation? Here are some suggestions for you to consider.

**On New Year's Day 1901, 200 000 people gathered in their best clothes in the heat of Sydney's Centennial Park to witness Australia become a nation. A grand and expensive ceremony with floats, bands and military groups passed through specially constructed arches. Britain's Earl of Hopetoun attended the ceremony and became Australia's first Governor-General. The six former colonies had become one new nation: the Commonwealth of Australia. 'One people, one flag, one destiny' was the official expression of the day.**

*Margaret Roberts, (1996) Creation of a Nation: The Movement Towards Federation, in The Australian Experience, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.*



**It was popularly believed that Australia was forged as a nation on the cliffs of Gallipoli in 1915 rather than in Sydney's Centennial Park in 1901. 'It was there that our young and untried troops ... quitted themselves as men', observed the Melbourne Argus.. Australians defined themselves, and were defined by others, in comparison with British soldiers. They came out of the comparison well.**

*David Day, (1996) Claiming a Continent: A history of Australia, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.*

**One whole theory of Australian society suggests that the Australian sense of identity and self respect came into being, not to the screams of bullets on the beaches of Gallipoli, but to the roar of the crowd at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. The theory goes that having been robbed of a decent battlefield in our fight for independence, we had to make do with the sporting field.**

*Mal Garvin, (1987) Us Aussies, Hayzon Pty Ltd, Victoria.*

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## FOCUS

- The quotes above suggest some ideas about events that helped to develop our sense of identity. Do you agree with the ideas expressed in these quotes? Can you suggest any other events that have helped to form our Australian identity?
  - What other views about Australia would you like to add to these ones, to build a more complete picture of Australia's history? Whose views are not included?
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# Australian history

According to the Concise Macquarie Dictionary, history is 'the branch of knowledge dealing with past events'. For most past events, some details are recorded and some are left out. These decisions about past events are usually made by the scholars in our society. Prevailing views may be those of the victors, those in positions of power and the decision makers. Often they are white and male. But history told from only one perspective can only ever tell you a part of the story.

Many Australians are actively interested in particular events in our history and put a lot of time and effort into researching these events. This might be in local historical societies. It might involve talking to, and recording the stories of people (and their descendants) who were there when history was being made, or it may be researching your own family history. The stories uncovered by this means will often provide different views of history.

Different people often interpret history differently and our views of past events can change with time. In the community meetings that were held during the development of this material, there was repeated reference to Australia's 'untold history' and the need for this to be addressed. In 1997, research into parent attitudes towards civics education found similar feelings:

**... many (parents) felt they had been taught a biased, distorted, incomplete and Anglo-centric version of Australian history. ... denied them a proper understanding of Aboriginal issues ... missed out on learning how the political process worked...**

*Denis Muller & Associates and Irving Saulwick and Associates, (1997) Civics and Citizenship Education in Australian Schools, A study of parent attitudes, for The Australian Parents Council.*

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## FOCUS

- How were you taught history at school? Who wrote this history? Did you enjoy learning about this history?
  - Can you recall examples of history which missed out on different perspectives? Which perspectives were they?
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# A Nation of Immigrants?

**Modern Australia is in a most fundamental sense the product of immigration. The continuing arrival of new settlers has been a dominant theme in the country's history and national development since 1788, and the overwhelming majority of its current inhabitants are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants arriving in the past two centuries. The influence of these successive flows of newcomers — initially from the British Isles, but more recently from all parts of the world — effectively defines every aspect of Australian life.**

*Stephen Castles, William Foster, Robyn Iredale, Glen Withers, (1998) Immigration and Australia, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.*

## Australia's current immigration policy

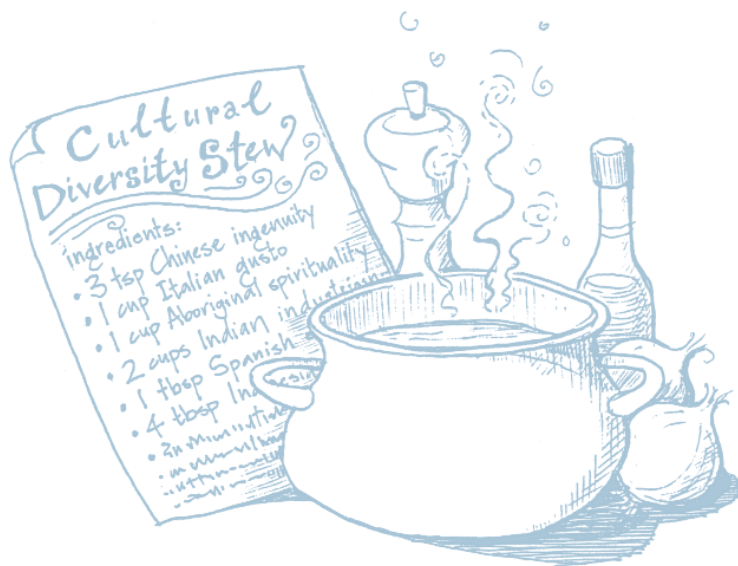
Australia's current immigration policy is non-discriminatory. Anyone from any country can apply to migrate regardless of their ethnic origin, sex, colour or religion. Migrants are selected in one of three categories. These are:

- skilled — migrants must satisfy a points test, have particular skills, be nominated by an Australian or have other links to Australia, have successful business skills or significant capital to invest for the benefit of the country.
- family — selected on the basis of the family relationship to a sponsor in Australia, these people are usually spouses, fiances or dependent children and parents.
- humanitarian — refugees and displaced persons who have suffered discrimination amounting to gross violation of their human rights.

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## FOCUS

- What do you think about these immigration categories? Are they adequate? Would you change any of them?
  - What is the history of immigration in your group?
  - Does anyone in the group remember when our immigration laws were more restrictive? What was the policy called? How was it enforced? When and why was it changed?
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## Community attitudes to immigration

Intense debates took place over immigration policy in 1984-85 and again in 1997-98 but the major parties in Australian politics have remained committed to a non-discriminatory immigration program.

Many industry groups advocate high levels of immigration, pointing to the benefits this brings. They argue that immigration does not add to unemployment, but quite the opposite: immigration reduces unemployment and improves the job prospects of the non-immigrant population by creating further economic growth.

Many studies have been undertaken on the relationship between immigration and unemployment, wages and inflation. These have generally shown that immigration has either no effect or a small positive effect. Despite this, surveys and public opinion polls in recent years have shown that the majority of people believe the level of immigration should be reduced, in part because they think immigration contributes to unemployment.

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## FOCUS

- What experience do you have of the recent debates on immigration? Have you seen opinion polls that indicate the level of community support for non-discriminatory immigration? What do they show?
  - Does opposition or support for immigration vary depending on where people live, their ages, occupation or sex? What changes in society may lead to changing attitudes towards immigration?
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## Want to do more?

If you have enjoyed your discussion and want to do more, you could:

- ask some local community leaders or elected politicians for their views on the issues you have discussed
- involve more people in the discussion
- order the learning circle which provides a structured but flexible framework for more discussion

## What's in the kits?

Apart from the six modules, each kit contains introductory information to help organisers and facilitators of learning circles. This information is based on the experience of many groups and provides practical suggestions to deal with issues that may arise. Focussed discussion questions and activities encourage participants to reflect on their own experiences and take control of their learning. This will make it more relevant and enjoyable.

A number of suggestions to help a group get started are included. These may help groups who are new to small group discussion or unsure of what to expect in a learning circle. If you are from the Adult and Community Education sector, information is included specifically about how the learning circles can be included in a 'course' program.

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For further information and ordering details for 'The Australian Nation' and 'Citizens and Public Life' learning circle kits please contact:

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