

NOT ALL AUSTRALIAN CITIZENS WERE EQUAL

Colleen O'Sullivan

There are some people, I feel sure, who still remember the first Naturalisation Ceremony held in the newly opened Kandos Community Centre in 1957. Perhaps they were among the 500 people who attended. Or perhaps they were among the 16 'New Australians' who received citizenship and became loyal subjects of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

30th September was a Monday night. A night, I imagine, of warmth and welcome; glamour and splendour; promise and expectation. A night carefully planned by Master of Ceremonies, J B Simpkins, Shire Clerk, J V Robinson and willing members of the Kandos Community Association.

As guests arrived they were entertained outside the hall with a medley of popular tunes by Kandos Town Band, its 22 players responding to the baton of Bandmaster Colin Byrnes. At 8pm the band took a break and inside the hall Johnny Mays' Orchestra supplied an hour of music for enthusiastic dancers to skip the light fandango.

At 9pm ceremony replaced dancing and the Town Band mounted the stage and played the National Anthem. Shire President Jackson introduced the sixteen candidates: Frederick and Hendrika Haarman; Bruno, Milda and Anda Spainis; Ferdinand and Anna Schlarp; Johannes and Leida Kaur; Walter and Mathilde Schraft; Jan Moc, Johanna Van Nes, Pieter Dejong, Joseph Kuchta and Edward Jan. Rights and responsibilities were explained, Bibles (provided by Rotary and Apex) distributed, the oath of allegiance administered and congratulations offered.

But that was only part of the ceremony. The speeches I have no doubt took up another hour: Mr Nott MLA, the four Reverends (McMahon, Wright, Dalziell and Leane); representatives of the two cement works, Country Women's Association, Combined Unions, Graziers' Association, Apex and Rotary, and finally J B Simpkins who also thanked the CWA and Hospital Auxiliary for the sumptuous supper.

Anda Spainis's 'thank you' on behalf of the 'New Australians' was a fitting ending to the noteworthy ceremony: 'I wish to thank my parents and all the other parents of children of my age and less, because it was they who lost all and left everything behind in the country of their birth so that their children and their grandchildren could find peace, security and happiness in this fair land.'

I think on the whole Australians are proud, like the United States, of being a nation of immigrants. Proud of the rich diversity of a multicultural community, as in Kandos. But we should not forget that Australian citizenship has a murky past.

The basic principle on which the Australian Federal Government was founded over a century ago was White Australia. It was enforced, not through legislation, but through the 'dictation test' and in doing so racism was invited through the back door. The aim of the dictation test was to exclude Asian and Pacific peoples and favour British and Northern Europeans. An immigration officer had the power to exclude anyone from entering Australia who could not complete a dictation test in any European language chosen by the officer. According to

historian Manning Clark, Australia 'suddenly acquired notoriety in the civilised world as a centre of human barbarism'. It was ironic given Australians' love of the 'mother country' Britain: head of an Empire made up of numerous Asian and black peoples in six continents.

Another irony of 'White Australia' was the denial of citizenship to indigenous Australians who had occupied the land for 60,000 years. It was not until 1967 that indigenous Australians were formally recognised as Australian citizens, despite a significant number of them fighting in two world wars. One of the duties expected of an Australian citizen, then and now, is to 'defend Australia should the need arise' but they did so without citizenship.

Mind you 'white' Australians didn't get Australian citizenship until the Nationality and Citizenship Act of 1948. Up until then we were British subjects. We continued as both British subjects and Australian citizens until the Australian Citizenship Act of 1984 which declared that Australian law would no longer regard Australians as British subjects. It's all very confusing. We still are British subjects aren't we? Until we become a republic?

On a darker note it seems to me that citizenship comes under threat in times of national fear. During the First World War, German Australians felt that threat, as evidenced in an editorial with the alarming headline 'The Enemy Within' *Mudgee Guardian* 23/9/1915). According to the writer the enemy were Germans, naturalised or unnaturalised, born in Germany or descended from Germans. They 'should all be rounded up and interned.' It was inflammatory language, full of generalisations, prejudice and misinformation, but it was a view being heard all over Australia.

Many Australians of German descent would have stories of families being hounded, discriminated against or interned, during both world wars. Donald Trump is not an aberration. In a nation under threat 'them versus us' becomes a catchcry. We should hope that in 21st century Australia the fear of terrorism does not erode our citizenship laws.

On a more neutral note, the descendants of 'New Australians' from 1904 might be interested in searching the National Archives in Canberra for information about their immigrant forbears. They can access 'naturalisation certificates' and 'case files'. Records give such information as date of arrival in Australia, ship or flight, town and country of birth, names of other family members, education, profession and address in Australia at the time of naturalisation. Check the website: www.naa.gov.au/ For records before 1904 check State Records: www.records.nsw.gov.au/

Caption: On Australian Citizenship Day, the Governor-General and Lady Cosgrove welcome some of Australia's new citizens.