



It's breeding obvious, mate

Australia and the US can avoid the bleak future awaiting dying old Europe, argues Mark Steyn

OES Western civilisation have a future? One answer's easy: if Western civilisation doesn't have a past, it certainly won't have a future. No society can survive when it consciously unmoors itself from its own inheritance. But let me answer it in a less philosophical way.

Much of Western civilisation does not have any future. That's to say, we're not just speaking philosophically but literally. In a very short time, France, Belgium, The Netherlands and other countries we regard as part of the Western tradition will cease to exist in any meaningful sense. They don't have a future because they've given up breeding.

Spain's population is halving with every generation. Two grown-ups have a total of one baby. So there are half as many children as parents. And a quarter as many grandchildren as grandparents. And an eighth as many great-grandchildren as great-grandparents. And after that there's no point extrapolating because you're over the falls and it's too late to start paddling back.

I received a flurry of letters from furious Spaniards when the Government decided to replace the words father and mother on its birth certificates with the less orientationally offensive terms Progenitor A and Progenitor B. This was part of the bureaucratic spring-cleaning of traditional language that always accompanies the arrival in law of gay marriage. But, with historically low numbers of progeny, the designations of the respective progenitors seem of marginal concern. They'd be better off trying to encourage the average young Spaniard to wander into a Barcelona singles bar and see if anyone wants to come back to his pad to play Progenitor A and Progenitor B. ("Well, OK, but only if I can be Progenitor A.")

Seventeen European nations are at what demographers call "lowest low" fertility, 1.3 births per woman, the point at which you're so far down the death spiral you can't pull out. In theory, those countries will find their population halving every 35 years or so. In practice, it will be quicker than that, as the savvier youngsters figure there's no point sticking around a country that has turned into an undertaker's waiting room. So large parts of the Western world are dying and, in Europe, the successor population to those ageing French and

Dutch and Belgians is in place.

Perhaps the differences will be minimal. In France, the Catholic churches will become mosques; in England, the village pubs will cease serving alcohol; in The Netherlands, the gay nightclubs will close up shop and relocate to San Francisco. But otherwise life will go on much as before. The new Europeans will be observant Muslims instead of post-Christian secularists, but they will still be recognisably European.

It will be like *Cats* after a cast change: same long-running show, new actors, but the plot, the music, the sets are all the same. The animating principles of advanced societies are so strong that they will thrive whoever's at the switch.

But what if they don't? In the 2005 rankings of Freedom House's survey of personal liberty and democracy across the world, five of the eight countries with the lowest freedom score were Muslim. Of the 46 Muslim majority nations, only three were free. Of the 16 nations in which Muslims form 20 per cent to 50 per cent of the population, only another three were ranked as free: Benin, Serbia and Montenegro and Suriname. It will be interesting to follow France's fortunes as a fourth member of that group.

If you think a nation is no more than a "great hotel" (as Canadian novelist Yann Martel described his own country, approvingly), you can always slash rates and fill the empty rooms for as long as there are any would-be lodgers left out there to move in. But there aren't going to be many would-be immigrants out there in the years ahead, not for ageing Western societies in which an ever smaller pool of young people pay ever higher taxes to support ever swelling geriatric native populations. And if you believe a nation is the collective accumulated wisdom of a shared past, then a dependence on immigration alone for population replenishment will leave you lost and diminished.

That's why Peter Costello's stirring call — a boy for you, a girl for me and one for Australia — is, ultimately, a national security issue, and a more basic one than how much you spend on defence.

Americans take for granted all the "it's about the future of all our children" hokey that would ring so hollow in a European election. In the 2005 German campaign, voters were offered what would be regarded in the

US as a statistically improbable choice: a childless man (Gerhard Schroeder) v a childless woman (Angela Merkel). Statist Europe signed on to Hillary Rodham Clinton's alleged African proverb — "It takes a village to raise a child" — only to discover they got it backwards: on the Continent, the lack of children will raze the village.

One would assume a demographic disaster is the sort of thing that sneaks up on you because you're having a grand old time. You stayed in university until you were 38, you took early retirement at 45, you had two months a year on the Cote d'Azur, you drank wine, you ate foie gras and truffles, you marched in the street for a 28-hour work week. It was all such great fun, there was no time to have children. You thought the couple in the next street would, or the next town, or in all those bucolic villages you pass through on the way to your weekend home.

But the strange thing is that Europeans aren't happy. The Germans are so slumped in despond that in 2005 the Government began running a Teutonic feelgood marketing campaign in which old people were posed against pastoral vistas, fetching young gays mooched around the Holocaust memorial, Katarina Witt stood in front of some photogenic moppets, then they all pointed fingers at the camera and shouted: "Du bist Deutschland!" ("You are Germany!") which was meant somehow to pep up glum Hun couch potatoes. Can't see it working myself.

The European Union got rid of all the supposed obstacles to happiness — war, politics, the burden of work, insufficient leisure time, tiresome dependents — yet its people are strikingly unhappy. Consider this poll taken in 2002 for the first anniversary of 9/11: 61 per cent of Americans said they were optimistic about the future, as opposed to 43 per cent of Canadians, 42 per cent of Britons, 29 per cent of the French, 23 per cent of Russians and 15 per cent of Germans. I wouldn't reckon those numbers will get any cheerier through the years.

Australia has more economic freedom than the EU and fewer distorting demographic problems so, along with the US, it's one of the two countries with a sporting chance of avoiding the perfect storm about to engulf the rest of the West.



Australian
Friday 18/8/2006
Page: 14
Section: General News
Region: National Circulation: 133,434
Type: National
Size: 415.93 sq.cms.
Published: MTWTF

Brief: POPULATE-A
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But at some point it, too, will have to confront these issues: not just the falling birthrate and ageing population but the underlying civilisational ennui of which the big lack of babies is merely the most obvious symptom.

The advantage Australians and Americans have is that most of the rest of the West is ahead of us: their canoes are already on the brink of the falls. But Australians who want their

families to enjoy the blessings of life in a free society should understand that the life we've led since 1945 in the Western world is very rare in human history. Our children are unlikely to enjoy anything so placid, and may well spend their adult years in an ugly and savage world in which ever more parts of the map fall prey to the reprimativisation that has afflicted Liberia, Somalia and Bosnia.

Mark Steyn is a regular opinion-page contributor to newspapers across the Western world, including *The Australian*. This is an edited extract from his CD Kemp lecture at the Institute of Public Affairs in Melbourne last night. For the full speech, visit:

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