Melbourne: Beyond Safety, Quality of Life, and Rankings

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I first visited Melbourne in July 2001 as a naive tourist. My first impression of the Victorian city was that of a great metropolitan city which epitomised multiculturalism, diversity, and innovation. Among other attractions, the city boosts a thriving fashion and creative industry, and it is host to several quality educational institutions such as the University of Melbourne, Monash University, and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

Melbourne's skyline

With a population of 4 million people, Melbourne is well regarded as one of the most liveable cities in the world. This year it was ranked 3rd most liveable by the London-based Economist Intelligent Unit, ahead of Sydney (7th) but behind Vancouver (1st) and Vienna (3rd). Mercer Consulting puts Melbourne on the 18th spot based on its Quality of Living Survey (2010), whilst the Monocle's Quality of Life rating chart in 2009 has the city on the 9th place.

I revisited the Victoria State Capital in the first week of July this year. Melbourne was dazzling.

Since 2001, the city must have doubled if not tripled on the cosmopolitan-barometer scale. What used to be specific to the downtown district, the ubiquitous features of Sino-Asian restaurants in Chinatown can now be found in other corners of the city. Pockets of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Malaysian restaurants, gift-shops and cell-phone businesses have sprouted all over. But, it was not just the Asian communities that have burgeoned – there is now an equal chance of bumping into people from other even more exotic continents.

Beyond the tenants, Melbourne's skyline has also evolved considerably. Rows after rows of swanky shopping arcades now form a parallel world to what we know as Orchard Road in Singapore. Standing at the junction of Swanton Street and La Trobe Street, you could be forgiven if you thought you were stuck in a crowd of shoppers at Wheelock Place (Notice the similarity between the Coops Shot Tower and the Orchard Wheelock cone architecture). The ratio between the Anglo-Saxon and Oriental faces was almost equal, and by that, I do not mean the average John or Jane whom I passed over on the pedestrian walkways. It includes frontline service staff in the shopping malls.

I am uncertain if the people I saw behind those counters were just temporary employees or if they were Australian residents. It was nonetheless, a clearly different demographic texture as compared to the Melbourne that I knew 10 years ago. Although the majority of these frontline service staff were likely to be Australian residents, I was told that a significant number were international students working part-time to supplement their living expenses.

Coops Shot Tower, Melbourne

Shops in the Royal Arcade Mall

Perhaps due to the strong service culture in the Australian retail industry, the service standards of foreign-born Asians were generally better compared to Singapore. On my few shopping trips, I was greeted politely (in English) and my enquiries were attended to professionally. If the service staff were transient labour, they certainly have done well in integrating into the host society.

The Aussies that I came across generally spoke well of the recent arrivals. They appreciated their contributions to the economy and their commitment to uphold "the Australian way of life" – whatever that means. Some however did caution that a few ethnic minority groups were marginalised. Melbourne was not perfect, they said.

Indeed, the spate of attacks on Indian students in Melbourne last year and the Cronulla Beach race riots in New South Wales in December 2005 underscored the importance of social cohesion and racial harmony. The former triggered a diplomatic row with India on issues pertinent to the safety and treatment of its citizens, while the latter sparked off national debates over policies on immigration, assimilation and the political conundrum on asylum seekers, particularly those from an Islamic background. More critically perhaps, these issues suggest that the challenges related to immigration and integration can be felt more strongly in certain ethnic quarters. Evidently, the outcomes are non-monolithic.

Melbourne, like other liveable cities around the world, offers an exciting environment for creative ideas to flourish. The attractions of this city lie beyond its infrastructure, buildings, and history. It encompasses an inclusive multicultural climate for individuals to engage with the larger

society. Yet, for such a situation to occur, both individuals and the collective group that he or she belongs to must play a part in mutual accommodation.

Like Melbourne, Singapore is a thriving city that holds out great promise for creating a livelihood to those who wish to call it home. It offers a comparable standard of living, third on the liveability scale on the new Global Liveable Cities Index, and regularly ranked as one of the best places to conduct business by the World Bank.

What I am envious of, is that there seems to be an easy modus vivendi, at street-level, between the host community and those who were foreigners; a recognition and adoption of the core Australian norms and ethos among the new arrivals. This must surely be the result of what has been an almost twenty year national debate on what constitutes these norms and the Australian spirit and how foreigners should respond to these.

With the greater presence of foreigners in our midst in Singapore, even if a good many of them are from seemingly similar ethnic communities, our own public discussion of what we expect at the service counter, in our heartlands, schools and all over, during the past year, is a good start to broadening our concept of social inclusion and multiculturalism. As the National Day season comes upon us again, and we celebrate what makes us who we are as Singaporeans, I hope that part of it entails some reflection on how we can open our homes and hearts to those who choose to be here from far and wide.

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