The economy, industries and businesses of a nation thrive on diversity; without it comes stagnation.

We have a very diverse economy with 509 industries, hundreds of thousands of categories of goods and services, and 2.1 million businesses. All this in a nation that is less than 1.5% of world GDP and has little more than 0.3% of the world’s population. That, and our innovation and productivity growth over the past several decades, has led to Australia having one of the highest standards of living among the 230 nations and dependencies. We are currently around sixth – even higher if we discount tiny nations and dependencies such as Liechtenstein (less than 38,000 people), Luxembourg, Brunei, Singapore or Switzerland – which has a third of our population of 24 million.

Social diversity is the other side of the coin, and again Australia is benefiting in this area.

Our population is very diverse. We have citizens from over 160 nations, speaking some 200 languages. Almost three in 10 citizens were born overseas from regions and countries shown in the first chart. The figure is higher – over four in 10 – if we include the children of these settlers.

In less than 250 years, Australia has moved from a predominantly Aboriginal population (now just 2%), to British, and on to European in the post-WWII decades. We are becoming Eurasian in the 21st century, with 12% of our citizens born overseas coming from Asia. In the 22nd century we will be becoming Asian, yet with a rich and diverse ancestry.
We have certainly had an enviable cultural mix of people cohabiting and integrating – if not assimilating – peaceably over the decades and centuries.

Our religious diversity is also increasing, and it is interesting to compare Australia’s religious affiliation with the world’s mix, as the next two charts show.

**Australia’s Religious Affiliations**

- **22.3%** No Religion
- **25.3%** Roman Catholic
- **9.4%** Not Stated
- **17.1%** Anglican
- **18.7%** Other Christian

24 million people

**World Religious Affiliations**

- **12.0%** Non-religious
- **31.0%** Christianity
- **23.8%** Islam
- **15.2%** Hinduism
- **7.3%** Buddhism
- **5.6%** Trad. Chinese
- **2.5%** Indigenous
- **2.6%** Other

7.2 billion people

SOURCE: IBISWorld 1/11/15
Australia has a high proportion of non-religious people, approaching one in four citizens compared with one in eight worldwide, and barely one in 10 being regular churchgoers. This is an outcome of being a rich and increasingly educated and questioning society. And whilst Christianity has had a history of terrorism (the Crusades, Ku Klux Clan) and oppression (the Spanish Inquisition and other disgraceful eras), those practices are fading into history. Although six out of 10 Australian citizens identify as Christian, we have a largely non-sectarian society.

Currently it is Islam where some fanatics in a handful of countries have turned to terrorism and oppression as a non-representative component of the one in four Islamic affiliated citizens of the world. Australia is largely insulated from these problems, though not totally immune.

So again, we have a fairly diverse religious society, living peaceably.

And as a final indication of social diversity, we have more generations alive today than at any other time in history, as the final exhibit shows. Indeed, it is almost unbelievable that six of the 12 generations since 1788 are still alive today! This is of course the outcome of much longer life expectancy than the 38 years expected in the late 18th century.
Being able to maintain a cohesive society with diverse beliefs and habits – and even traditions – is no mean feat and an ongoing challenge.

Different generations have or develop different habits, customs and traditions – all of which are not to be confused with values such as love, respect and concern for others, which are more or less timeless.

People confuse habits and values all the time – often using the term “value systems” – which can generate inter-generational squabbles and arguments for no useful purpose.

When we hear people defend a tradition, we should be suspicious: it is often a habit that has passed its use-by date, and has no value!

### Examples of traditions, habits or attitudes that are not values include:

- home ownership (more people are, and will, lease/rent)
- doing housework (it is now being outsourced)
- renovations, maintenance and gardening (ditto)
- one long career (we will have many)
- same place for holidays (more variety is now the norm)
- being mostly on campus for tertiary education (now going online or hybrid!)
- criminalizing drugs (should be decriminalized and legalized to control them)
- not cohabiting until married (are you kidding, a lucky dip process?)
- gay relationships being scandalous (not any more)

Living longer means living with and respecting a wide variety of habits and traditions across different generations. After all, habits and traditions are comfortable to each generation. The important thing is to distinguish them from values that are truly worth promoting and defending at all costs.

Indeed, we are a diverse society, but it takes leadership, freedom and accommodation to create cohesion. By doing so, the economy flourishes and our standard of living rises to create a happier and hopefully fairer society where those who are less well-off are looked after or supported.

Imperfect as we may be, we are very high up the scale on the standard of living and quality of life measures. And five of our capital cities are in the 10 most livable cities on the planet. Doesn’t get much better than that.