The traditions of Aborigines in south-eastern Australia are seen as being less than real, writes Paul Briggs.

IN RECENT months, the media has been saturated with stories concerning abuse, neglect and crime involving remote indigenous communities. Unsurprisingly, these have met with no shortage of suggestions, mostly dredged from the ashes of past policy failures. For example, Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough launched a scheme to "showcase" indigenous Australians by employing Aborigines from remote communities in five-star tourist venues on the eastern seaboard.

The idea caught many a breath but not just because of its patronising nature. The minister had voiced what many Australians think, and that is that Australia's "genuine" indigenous people can only be found in remote northern and north-western Australia.

This is part of a national tendency that consistently undermines the identity of almost 200,000 Aboriginal people — half of the nation's documented total Aboriginal population — who live in south-eastern Australia.

Identity is a concept that most Australians take for granted, and rightly so. Any humane and democratic society affords its citizens the right to shape their most personal attribute — their identity.

A common characteristic of identity comes from tradition; a process by which cultural traits earn their currency and allure and establish their legitimacy as a common thread for a group of people to hold on to and celebrate.
Many people will have been brought up with their present identity and traditions, while others will adopt the traditions and culture of another place or another people. The central value on which a joyful and confident sense of identity relies is that of choice.

Much to our bitter sorrow and loss, south-eastern Australia's Aborigines have no opportunity to take identity for granted, and no opportunity to celebrate their culture in the environment of diversity and multiculturalism that the nation purportedly values.

In the continuing hangover of colonialism, Aboriginal Australians are relegated to a status and image of remote and clueless disadvantage, except for the selective and iconic images of traditional lifestyle, which are appropriated and manipulated for commercial purposes.

This tendency is perpetuated often subconsciously in the mainstream of south-eastern Australian communities. This is highlighted in a report on indigenous identity in Victoria's Yorta Yorta country, which will shortly be released by the Melbourne-based community forum, the Eureka Project.

The report is aptly entitled *Left for Dead* and includes a survey of 12 months of Victoria's major print media. Of those reports, 68 per cent were devoted to issues and personalities of far north and north-western indigenous communities. Only 18 per cent of the coverage of Aboriginal issues related to Victorian indigenous communities, and most of those stories related to problems of, or "caused" by, indigenous people.

The same characteristics are evident in national policy debates and in the development and implementation of programs that involve indigenous people.

In south-eastern Australia, the notion of Aboriginal identity is further devalued because our communities are usually tiny minorities embedded in broadly successful and prosperous urban settings.

Indigenous disadvantage becomes lost in the law of averages drawn out of the wider community, and we are consistently denied access to the data that describes us and our circumstances. This denies us the opportunity to own our problems and to actively contribute to their resolution.

There is a penetrating sadness in the consequence that indigenous people in communities such as Victoria are constantly portrayed as groups that have not made a contribution to the economic and social fabric of the wider community.

We are stigmatised as a "deficit", having nothing to offer or share, and represent nothing to celebrate in mutual joy with the mainstream community.

Our forced assimilation with European colonisers has meant that our culture has evolved in racial ignorance compared to that of our northern brethren. Our contemporary expressions of tradition are seen as pale imitations of the "real" indigenous culture, when they are actually modern and evolved forms of culture, values and tradition.

If indigenous people in south-eastern Australia are to join the mainstream as equals in our national society, then we need to be allowed to reclaim and share our identity and culture. That requires an
acceptance that identity is not prescribed by geography and cannot be imposed on people by commercial forces or cultural dominance.

The Aboriginal community of the Yorta Yorta country is undiminished in its determination to protect and nurture those elements of identity that are central to our being.

We are undeterred by the denigration that is directed at us, although we are devastated that the hardship and ostracism that we have endured is now being visited on our children, grandchildren and destined for our descendants who are unborn.

This is not an "Aboriginal" issue. It is an issue that affects our entire community and is one in which every citizen has an opportunity and responsibility to make things better in the future.

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