



The contemporary importance of the orphans
By Paul Lynch MLC

Keynote address at the 14th annual commemoration gathering
of the Great Irish Famine Commemoration Committee at Hyde Park Barracks, Macquarie
Street, Sydney
Sunday, 26 August 2018

Acknowledgement of country

Can I thank Trish Strong and the commemoration committee for their invitation to speak today? Like many of you I've been coming to this commemoration over a number of years. On looking at the impressive list of distinguished speakers at previous commemorations I notice that I seem to be the only current Australian politician to have been invited to give the address. I'm inclined to commend the committee for their courage.

Inevitably I think about issues and will speak today politically and if that means some think I've been provocative, it means it has worked. The contemporary significance of the orphans whom we commemorate lies in two areas. One is how economic ideology that said the government should not interfere with the market turned the potato blight into Ireland's greatest catastrophe and how the philosophy behind that continues today. The second is that the anti-Irish racism and sectarianism directed at the orphans, also continues today, directed now at other groups.

I must comment on language. The events in Ireland commencing in 1845 are commonly referred to as a famine. It wasn't a famine. Famine means an absence of food. There was food. But the starving – the poor – weren't able to get it. It was largely sent overseas. The better, the more accurate term is the great hunger, an gorta mor in Irish. The great hunger was most famously explained by young Irishman John Mitchell, the son of a Presbyterian minister from County Derry and for a while, a convict in Van Diemen's Land. He said 'the almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight but England sent the famine'.

Irish food was sent to England to be consumed in English cities. By 1800 Ireland was supplying the cities of Britain with 79 percent of their butter, 86 percent of their pork and 83 per cent of their beef. In 1846-9 Ireland had 734,000 oxen, and 766,000 swine. Most of them went overseas as did the wheat and oats produced in Ireland. Revisionist historians argue the food sent overseas wouldn't have made up for the blight. Maybe – but it would still have saved many thousands of lives.

The orphans were girls and young women mostly but not exclusively catholic from the workhouses of the Irish poor law unions. Workhouses were a very good place to get away from if you could.

They were an English concept introduced into Ireland in the 1830s based on assumptions made about the English economy. It was never going to work well in Ireland. Much of the thinking behind the poor law scheme came from the English economist William Nassau Senior. He is remembered for allegedly being overheard saying that a million dying in the Irish disaster would do no good. That is, it wouldn't be enough.

There were 130 administrative unions funded by local landlord rates. Some areas were so poor and landlords so inefficient or indebted they were never going to work. Unions like this were known to go bankrupt. That meant no relief when England said relief for the great hunger had to come from the unions and not England. The potential for catastrophe should have been obvious.

The workhouses were designed and intended to be awful, to discourage the poor from using them. This is motivated by an appalling theory about the deserving and undeserving poor. It sounds like those responsible for workhouses were behind Centrelink's recent robo debt recovery fiasco and unemployment benefits you can't live on. Poverty was believed to be the fault of the individual.

The diet was made deliberately monotonous in workhouses. And the Irish version was intended and designed to be even more stringent than the English one. By 1847 and 1848 workhouses were housing 250,000 people. Where workhouses provided relief, food for children was inadequate. And that was before 1845.

During the great hunger Cork workhouse was found to have 150 boys occupying a ward 45 feet long by 30 feet wide. There were a total of 24 beds. At the time a doctor visited, 60 children under 13 years of age had died in the week before the visit. The doctor who reported this said conditions were even worse in Bantry. A workhouse in Lurgan was found to have 63 children dying in the first week of February 1847.

When the scheme under which the orphans came to Australia was scrapped, there were still 104,000 children under 15 years of age in workhouses. Many were not in fact orphans. It has been estimated one in four orphans still had a parent alive. Sometimes blind eyes were turned to them. Often they were not.

Sometimes supposed orphans were left there because there was no other option. Sometimes a parent or parents left them there so they could search for work and reclaim children later. That seems to have been achieved very rarely. In Waterford an inspector found that 35 people who visited the workhouse there on a Sunday were visiting 70 of their own children, obviously not orphans. He took appropriate stern measures.

The scale of the catastrophe from which the orphans escaped was overwhelming. Terry Eagleton an English academic described it as 'the greatest social disaster of 19th century Europe – an event with something of the characteristics of a low-level nuclear attack'. The more conservative English historian a. J.P. Taylor compared the state of Ireland to the notorious German concentration camp Belsen. He wrote that all Ireland was Belsen. That language is matched by the poetry. Seamus Heaney in his poem 'at a potato digging' wrote this:

live skulls, blind eyed, balanced on
wild higgledy skeletons
scoured the land in 'forty five'

The census taken in 1851 recorded 6½ million people living in Ireland. There had been 8,175 million recorded for 1841. The census commissioners calculated that the population would have exceeded 9 million if there'd been no famine and associated fever. They calculated the total loss at nearly 2.5 million. And there are good grounds to believe that the 1841 census figure was significantly underestimated. That means the loss was even greater. The current population of the whole island is now less than in 1841. It never again reached that 1841 figure.

Several years after the blight ended, Frederick Engels travelled from Dublin to Galway. He thought the great hunger continued 'I had never imagined famine could be so tangibly real. Whole villages are deserted; in between - the splendid parks of the smaller landlords who are virtually the only people still living there, lawyers mostly'. There were several causes of what one writer described as a mediaeval anachronism occurring in the world's strongest and richest empire.

Significantly, some were government decisions that turned this natural disaster into a human catastrophe. And there is very contemporary resonance in some of this. The dominant economic view of those making decisions in London was that of laissez faire. Its contemporary incarnation is neo-liberalism, sometimes called economic rationalism, a subset of it being austerity.

Laissez-faire is a French phrase that literally means 'let do'. The then French minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert asked a group of French businessmen how the French state could help their business operations and promote commerce. He was told so the story goes 'laissez-nous faire' – leave it to us. Two hundred years later the British Government did exactly that and the great hunger resulted. Bizarrely some still believe in this philosophy today – despite the evidence of the banking royal commission.

Laissez faire places absolute faith in the efficiency and effectiveness of the market, so free trade is an unchallengeable virtue. It means less for government to do and less of government – so there's a pressure to reduce government expenditure and government functions. Private is always better than public. And individual gain through competition is the basis of a successful society so individuals shouldn't rely on government. The laissez faire approach also thus logically gave priority to the rights and entitlements of the owners of private property. An owner of property could do with it exactly as he wished (and it usually was a he).

These economic views sustained severe damage after the Second World War with the development of what is sometimes called the welfare state – Nye Bevan's NHS in the UK and Medicare in Australia are obvious examples. There have been retreats in these areas commencing in the 1970s and the laissez-faire of the 1840s has been gaining ground again. Although the GFC was a useful reminder of how unwise that could be.

This conservative economic liberalism was the dominating philosophy motivating the government in London. It was this that turned the blight into the famine.

Historian, ciaran o murchadha wrote this:

in regard to state relief, what is immediately striking is that proportionate to the resources of the United Kingdom, of which Ireland had technically been an integral part since 1801, it was abysmally small in volume. Altogether the treasury spent some 8,000,000 pounds on relief programmes in Ireland, most of it consisting of advances on loans that it was intended should be repaid. ... This expenditure did not stretch the financial resources of

the British state to any degree, let alone the immeasurably greater ones of the Empire, and it is put into perspective by comparison with the 20,000,000 pounds compensation paid to former west Indian slave-owners in 1833, and the 69,000,000 pounds cost of the Crimean war of 1854-1856.

As was said at the time the Irish poor were being killed by political economy.

Cecil Woodham-Smith in her book *The Great Hunger* said this of the obtuseness, to use a kind phrase, of the British government:

much of this obtuseness sprang from the fanatical faith of mid-nineteenth century British politicians in the economic doctrine of laissez-faire, no interference by government, no meddling with the operation of natural causes. Adherence to laissez-faire was carried to such a length that in the midst of one of the major famines of history, the government was perpetually nervous of being too good to Ireland and of corrupting the Irish people by kindness, and so stifling the virtues of self-reliance and industry.

Woodham-Smith was an English writer.

There were three main government players in this tragedy. Robert Peel was conservative Prime Minister until June 1846 when he was succeeded by the Whig Lord John Russell. Charles Edward Trevelyan was in effect permanent head of treasury. He was the person most directly responsible for the development and implementation of British policy in Ireland. When British officials driven by humanity rather than ideology distributed food to the starving, Trevelyan would reprimand them. He was described as 'treasury in its purest and least merciful form'. Russell was philosophically at one with Trevelyan. When delegations came to Russell, seeking relief from starvation, he was said to give them pamphlets with quotations from the economist Adam Smith on the limits of government intervention. These pamphlets were distributed in Ireland instead of food. Peel was inveterately anti-Irish and renowned for singing orange songs. He was given a nick name, reputedly by Daniel O'Connell so that Prime Minister Peel was referred to as 'orange peel'. Early after the appearance of the blight, without treasury approval, peel ordered the purchase of Indian corn, or maize to help alleviate distress. In Ireland of course they had to purchase something no one else in England or Ireland purchased because otherwise that would interfere with free trade and the market. So it was maize. It didn't quite work as hoped. Indian corn wasn't used in Ireland. It was hard and if not properly prepared could penetrate the intestines. Ireland didn't have the steel mills needed to conveniently grind the maize. Because of this and inadequate cooking, its consumption resulted in severe and widespread bowel complaints, especially in children. It became known as Peel's brimstone.

The non-interventionist philosophy of laissez-faire meant no government importation of food into Ireland and no prohibition of food from leaving Ireland. Free trade couldn't be interfered with. When evictions escalated during the catastrophe, the government's view was that landlords were entitled to do whatever they wished with their own land, even if that exacerbated death rates. Eviction was spurred by the government's policy. The government said whatever relief there was must come from local poor law unions funded by a rate on local landlords. Getting rid of small tenants reduced the amount of rates a landlord had to pay.

The government reluctantly authorised relief projects mainly by advancing loans for local work to give wages to peasants to buy food. But the wages were set so low that only very limited benefit actually flowed. It did result in the construction of a number of what were called 'roads of hunger' (boithre an ocráis).

Claims of genocide have been levelled over government policy, starting with John Mitchell. The case has most recently been powerfully prosecuted by Tim Pat Coogan in his book, *The Famine Plot* published only in 2012.

The position of the English government was also motivated by a perverse strategy for a type of nation building. The Irish economy and society had to be entirely remade in accord with the progressive principles of laissez-faire. The Irish economy was inefficient and there were too many small holders, too many Irish peasants leading a subsistence lifestyle.

Those small holders needed to be removed and the estates turned over to grazing in an efficient and economically rational way. Just coincidentally, it would also allow Ireland to keep feeding English cities. It was precisely the same economic theory, implemented by the same government and class as gave rise to the enclosure of the common lands in England, and the same as the fearful highland clearances in Scotland. No amount of economically rational defence in subsequent centuries by revisionist historians can mitigate the horrors of these events.

Remaking Ireland was helped by the evictions. It was also helped by the Gregory Clause – the requirement for Irish peasantry to surrender land holdings to be eligible for any form of famine relief thus removing them as smallholders.

Rather than recognising economic decisions for what they were, the government pretended that they were natural causes which revealed the divine hand of providence. Notoriously Trevelyan wrote of ‘a bright light shining in the distance through the dark cloud which at present hangs over Ireland’. He saw this catastrophe as the work of ‘an all wise providence in a manner as unexpected and unthought of as it is likely to be effective’. This providentialism saw divine providence punishing the Irish for the papacy and potatoes and serendipitously giving rise to a more efficient Ireland with fewer people. Edmund Burke, the Irishman, who for reasons I can’t fathom still gets a good press today said this of the famine ‘it is not by breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature and consequently the laws of god, that we are to place our hope of softening the divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer’. Seeing god’s hand in the famine is similar to Cromwell invoking god to justify Drogheda. The providentialists saw that the era of large scale farming as lucrative commercial enterprises was about to begin; this was proof that ‘the blight had, indeed, been a visitation of providence’.

As historian O Murchadha said Christian providentialism and the unyielding tenets of political economy constituted the profoundest misfortune for the Irish poor. As well there was the ill-concealed and often unconcealed anti-Irish racism of many of the English ascendancy.

Politicians and the press constantly declared that this catastrophe flowed from a flaw in the Irish character. The Irish were lazy and stupid which resulted in the potato economy which in turn caused all the other problems the country endured including the devastation resulting from the blight. The English in this view had in fact been very generous. Constant racism came from the times and the magazine punch which regularly portrayed the Irish as monkey-like and sub-human.

There are of course contradictions surrounding laissez-faire economics and neo liberalism – at precisely the time conservative economists then and now kept and keep saying that government should get out of the road of business, and that government should be smaller and everything privatised, that free trade and the private market could deal with the Irish famine or Australian banks should pay less tax, at the very same time they advocate dramatic state expansion in some fields. In Australia, we’re building more prisons than ever before. In

both absolute and comparative terms more aboriginal people are now imprisoned than at the time of the royal commission into black deaths in custody. The only element of the contemporary western state that hasn't felt the full rigours of economic rationalism is the criminal justice system.

In Ireland during an *gorta mor*, while the English government wouldn't interfere with free trade and wouldn't feed the starving, they increased the number of troops. They passed several coercion bills to the despair of parliamentarians such as Daniel O'Connell and William Smith O'Brien. These bills made it easier to oppress and repress the population of Ireland.

The call for small government didn't apply to the military arm of the British Empire in Ireland. The English government wouldn't feed Ireland, but they would coerce Ireland. The Irish could starve but they would be coerced.

The first group of orphans in the ship *Earl Grey* arrived in Sydney in October 1848. By August 1850, 4114 orphans had arrived from 119 workhouses in Ireland. There were eleven ships to Sydney with 2253; three ships with 606 orphans to Adelaide and 1255 in six ships to Port Phillip. The last ship was the *Tippoo Saib* arriving in Sydney on 29 July 1850.

At one level the orphans were well out of the workhouses of Ireland – well out of the land where, in the words of yeast, the graves were walking.

Australia was not however necessarily a paradise for Irish exiles or immigrants – and many saw themselves as exiles rather than as immigrants. The English looked at migration as a cure for Ireland, the Irish often saw it as a curse. Anti-Irish prejudice and racism and sectarian extremism were a feature of colonial life. That's no surprise. The colony was part of the ascendancy's empire. Some argue these features weren't extinct until the 1960s.

The tone can be gauged from the awful Samuel Marsden, who said this:

the number of catholic convicts is very great in the settlement; and these in general composed of the lowest class of the Irish nation, who are the most wild, ignorant and savage race ... governed entirely by the impulse of passion and always alive to rebellion and mischief they are very dangerous members of society ... they are extremely superstitious artful and treacherous ... they have no true concern whatever for any religion nor fear of the supreme being: but are fond of riot drunkenness and cabals.

It's a mistake to paint the picture as only one colour, saying all non-Irish European colonists were viciously anti-Irish all of the time. Historical reality and human beings will always be more complex than that, and between 1/4 and 1/5 of the population of NSW in the 1840s was born in Ireland. Historian Malcolm Campbell argues that the United States would have been a less welcoming place for Irish immigrants in 1840s than was New South Wales.

There were also some significant non-sectarian figures in colonial administration. The Anglo-Irish Governor Bourke is one example. Another was John Plunket, NSW's longest serving attorney general.

Public anti-Irish feeling had peaks and troughs. The peaks included the 1804 Vinegar Hill uprising and the 1868 attempted assassination of Prince Alfred. One of the peaks that can also be identified in this country's history of anti-Irish prejudice and racism was when the famine orphans arrived in the colonies. In some of the anti-Irish ranting, there's a hostility that approaches hysteria and it started even before ships arrived.

When they did arrive there was a chorus of accusation about the character and background of the orphans. The colonial press, in a tabloid style with which regrettably we are today only too familiar, condemned them as the ‘sweepings of the workhouses’. The *Melbourne Argus* spoke of ‘hordes of useless and lawless savages’. Notorious anti-Irish figure John Dunmore Lang opposed Irish immigration and argued against immigrants such as these. He preferred ‘virtuous and industrious Protestants’. He thought the colony was at risk of being Tipperafied by Irish Catholics. He accused Caroline Chisholm of being an ‘artful female Jesuit’. These next figures are several decades later, but they are instructive. By 1876 there were 130 orange lodges in NSW with 19,000 members. By the late 1870s it was estimated 15% of protestant males over 16 were members. One respectable colonist was horrified at the Irish Catholics allegedly taking over, writing ‘if it be not neutralised by a great influx of English females, the consequences must be humiliating and disastrous to this colony as an ascendant protestant community’. This was typical of many. The ascendancy knew who they were, and wanted to stay that way. Official commentary referred to the orphans as being unsuitable and of inferior character and possessed of dirty habits. They were profoundly distasteful to ascendancy colonists. There is also a pervasive sexism in the ascendancy’s approach although to be fair that wasn’t the exclusive preserve of those who ran the British Empire.

Opposition to Irish female migration reached such a level that a legislative assembly select committee was established in 1858 to inquire into it, after the colonial press was hurling around terms of abuse such as ‘useless trollops’ and ‘barefoot little country beggars’ and were carrying caricatures of them as simian and apelike.

There was a range of experiences for the orphans. Some thrived and, compared to the catastrophe from which they came, led remarkably full and positive lives, as emerges from historians such as Trevor McClaughlin, Libby Connors and Bernadette Turner. I think the point is also well made in Evelyn Conlon’s *Not The Same Sky* based on the orphans from the ship the *Thomas Arbuthnot*.

So why do we remember the orphans, and why remember the great hunger. It’s more I think than mere antiquarianism or a hopeless nostalgia by Irish Australians.

The great hunger still has immense resonance in Ireland. It goes beyond the haunting famine cottages in places like the ring of Kerry that are seen by tourists. The memory was still significant enough for then Prime Minister Blair in 1997 to extend an apology for the English Government’s role. That was part of the Irish peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. Some writers and authors on the other hand downplay this history. Coogan calls them revisionists. I’d term them West Britons. It’s similar to conservatives in this country who accuse those of us who tell the truth of wearing black armbands, when they’re wearing white blind folds. There’s a tendency, primarily in parts of Ulster, or as I term it, English occupied Ireland that has echoes of the providentialism I spoke of earlier. At a visual level, the comparative lack of monuments to The Great Hunger in Ulster compared to the 26 counties is extreme.

Remembering these events also gives a voice to the dead, to remind the revisionists of the truth of the past, to wear a green armband rather than a black one.

As we know from this country and as we’ve seen in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, truth telling is an essential element in reconciliation and proceeding forward.

The most important reason that we should commemorate these events here however are not Irish ones, but Australian ones. The history I’ve talked about today provides important warnings for our contemporary world.

The first warning relates to economic policy, to the role of government and the sort of society in which we wish to live. The second relates to the consequences of racism and racial bigotry and the significance of multiculturalism, to say nothing of reconciliation with our lands traditional owners.

The current incarnation of laissez faire economics is neo-liberalism. Frank Stillwell defined that as ‘the ideology that seeks to justify the restructuring of the economy to increase opportunities for private profit, often couched in the language of ‘market freedom’ and ‘individual choice’.

This involves the familiar array of privatisation, deregulation and so forth. Philosophically this rejects any collective interest but prioritises the individual interest a citizen has in the market place. The pursuit of individual profit and advantage is prioritised over the common good. In some ways the possibility of a common good is disputed. As one notorious British politician said ‘there is no such thing as society’. And I still hate her over the hunger strikes. Contemporary laissez-faire champions give us increasing privatisation, a declining public sector, declining or stagnating real wages to the benefit of profits, attempts to reduce corporate tax rates, and all the rest. This is not the occasion to target particular contemporary political decisions and I’ve tried not to be any more party-political than I have to be today but I am standing literally only metres from the adjacent building which now temporarily holds NSW land registry services, that’s until it is relocated to Mascot or Parramatta as I understand it. It used be the land titles office. I can’t resist saying that the privatisation of the land titles office was probably the dumbest privatisation in the history of the western world. The proceeds, which were comparatively modest, were to go into knocking down and rebuilding perfectly adequate stadiums.

This primacy of the market, the superiority of private over public, and limiting the role of government was the philosophy that drove the catastrophe of the great hunger. It was from this philosophy that the orphans fled. These are lessons that we all should have learned from the orphans. Regrettably not everyone has. Some Australians seem to be slow learners.

The other lesson we should have learnt from orphans is how not to treat people from another cultural or religious tradition.

There is currently a resurgence of racist themes and outpourings in Australian society. That is not to say that everyone is racist. In fact for example, despite the constant campaigning of some media outlets, polls show that 80% of the community support the racial discrimination act including S18C. And several months ago we forced the State Government to introduce reforms to make racial vilification laws in NSW effective albeit three years late. But we still have current impersonators of nineteenth century ranters saying that all terrorists are Muslims. That precisely was what was said by some in colonial New South Wales about Irish Catholics when Henry O’Farrell tried to shoot Alfred. And that current claim ignores incidents in Oslo, Quebec, Portland and Charleston, among others.

In July last year I arranged a room in State Parliament House for the launch of the islamophobia in Australia report dealing with hundreds of incidents of islamophobia. There are also now quite extraordinary attacks on Chinese Australians. You can’t now apparently make representations to governments or politicians on matters of interest to the Chinese community without being an overseas agent. Such activity has regularly been carried out by Australian citizens of a plethora of different backgrounds. And on this basis presumably it’s illegitimate for Australians of Cambodian background to object to Hun Sen’s recent election without being registered as foreign agents. And heaven’s knows what they’d make of my

speeches and representations to Australian governments over two decades on topics ranging from the Irish peace process to a visa for Gerry Adams. There's the unremitting campaign in one national newspaper about so-called Sudanese gang crime, despite the fact that it's less than 1% of a falling crime rate in Victoria. One assumes that it's actually about the Victorian election. Much of this is racist or provides the environment for racism. It sounds very like the 1840s. And there's a lot of dog whistling by conservative politicians. This has massive dangers for multiculturalism, and by implication for aboriginal reconciliation.

Those demanding only one culture want to establish culturally sound university courses on western civilisation. Which bits I wonder – the inquisition, the 30 years' war or the holocaust? And they want people in the room monitoring the academics – presumably academic freedom isn't one of the values they identify as western. But it's all part of an assault on our multicultural society. An insistence that we conform to one stereotype set by those who claim to decry political correctness. What they mean is that we have to conform to what they say is correct.

I've quoted colonists who hyperventilated over the possibility of their culture being changed and challenged by Irish catholic immigrants.

If you believe writers like Patrick O'Farrell the exclusive ascendancy culture of this place was changed by the Irish who were the dynamic factor in this country's European history. Even if you don't agree with that analysis, no one now can read the rantings of the 19th century critics now with anything but incredulity. No one now seriously decries the contribution the orphans or Irish immigrants generally made to Australia. As to the orphans particularly, the 1859 parliamentary report dismissed the allegations made against them. And their lives in many cases were remarkably successful.

Since the 1960s the anti-Irish racism and prejudice I've quoted just seems absurd. The difficulty with an optimistic view is that there is still a racist tinge to our public debate with racist views being declaimed through megaphones. There was a neo-Nazi recently broadcast on cable TV. A senator from Queensland who got 19 votes in the last election wants to return to a white Australia policy and to go back to the golden past of the 1950s. He's forgotten the continued existence of sectarianism through the 1950s.

An added concern is that it's not restricted to the margins. Andrew Bolt writing in the *Daily Telegraph* said Australia is being overwhelmed by immigration and we are at risk of having our culture destroyed. It's very much like the 1840s. He says he's entitled to say this because of his freedom of speech. Maybe we're entitled to be free of his speech. Threats of being swamped and culture being threatened really is precisely what the critics of the orphans complained of.

What of these words: 'I want to maintain one culture in this country; we should have one culture we can get behind' - was that John Dunmore Lang? An ascendancy spokesman from the 19th century? In fact it was a Federal Cabinet Minister six weeks ago. I don't know if he's still a Cabinet Minister – it's hard to keep up.

Another then Cabinet Minister even more recently warned of the risk of separatist multicultural societies being established in Australia. That's more Marsden than Lang, but it's what they said about the Irish in the nineteenth century.

And these people are terrified by ghettos and ghettoization. They accused the Irish of that too – Ruth Park wrote brilliantly about it in *Poor Man's Orange* and *Harp in the South* and Kylie Tennant wrote about it in her novel *Foveaux*. The moral panic generated then was as

absurd as it is today. The panic about ghettos is about places like Cabramatta, Bankstown, Lakemba, Auburn and Liverpool.

Let me tell you about Liverpool. I often say it's the centre of the universe, and not just because it's where Michael Dwyer got his land grant in 1806 or because I've been the State Member since 1995. It's simply one of the most interesting places ethnically and culturally you can imagine, considerably more interesting than its critics. In Liverpool we don't need Federal Ministers or conservative columnists telling us that we're a problem, or we have to change or that we have to conform to whatever culture they deem acceptable – or politically correct.

The latest census shows that 45.7% of the people living in the electorate I represent were born overseas. Only 9% were born in Ireland or the United Kingdom. 42.6% of the community were born in a non-English speaking country. 76.2% of people living in the electorate have at least one parent born overseas. 58.5% of the population in the electorate speak a language other than English at home.

Can I say to those Federal Ministers and their media barrackers who have said that we should all have just one culture – presumably theirs – can I say to those people who follow in the footsteps of those who attacked the orphans for their ethnicity and culture 170 years ago, you won't abolish Liverpool, because that's the implication of what they say. It's a mad and insane fantasy to think that you can achieve by glib racist soundbites what the opponents of the orphans failed to achieve in the 19th century.

The fundamental absurdity in contemporary attacks on multiculturalism is the abject failure to have learnt from history including that of the orphans. The critics of the orphans were wrong. Even more fundamentally, if you accept that Australia as a society is more good than bad – and I readily accept there are certainly things we can improve upon (including the State and Federal Governments) – but if it is more good than bad – then surely that must stem from wave after wave of migration from all around the world, from a plethora of cultures. The great Australian story including that of the orphans is of someone, born somewhere else, coming to Australia and making this their home. The failure to understand this, and the demand there be one and only one culture, be it in the 1840s or the twenty first century is a colossal failure of historical understanding. Those who are guilty of it are not probably terribly good Australians themselves.

The two lessons from the orphans – the inadequacy of economics that focuses only on markets and profits and the inadequacy of racism have recently been brought together by the retiring race discrimination commissioner, Tim Soutphommasane. He's talked of the monetisation of racism. Facing the fracturing of the media – more and more outlets appearing each with a declining share, elements of the media seem to be using racism as part of their business model. Giving a platform to racism attracts publicity which impacts on advertising revenue. After all, you can do whatever you like with your private property, if you're a landlord evicting tenants or a media proprietor giving airspace to a neo-Nazi. And it's easier when you're aided and abetted by dog-whistling politicians.

We should as a society have learnt a great deal more from the history of the orphans. Some of us have, but some slow learners have yet to catch-up. They have to learn that racism is always evil and the unrestrained freedom of the market to the exclusion of the common good leads to catastrophe.

And that is the significance of the orphans.