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Australia's role in the biggest world game

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Many people took time out this week to inspect the national character, writes Miranda Devine.

IT WAS Sydney's uber-power lunch at Machiavelli Ristorante on Monday, when *The Bulletin* magazine unveiled its list of the 100 most influential Australians. There was the most influential Australian, Rupert Murdoch, feasting on prawns and calamari at the top table, and chatting animatedly to the Treasurer, Peter Costello, who did not appear on the list, and Garry Linnell, *The Bulletin's* editor-in-chief turned boss of news and current affairs at an embattled Channel Nine.

Linnell's glum-faced boss, John Alexander, and TV star Jana Wendt also sat at the top table, watching listees such as Pauline Hanson, Margaret Fulton, Dick Smith and Michael Gudinski mingle with the finest assembly of Sydney's business and media lunchers ever gathered in one spot.

Linnell told the high-spirited crowd that when he first arrived in Sydney from Melbourne he thought the Clarence Street restaurant was just another city eatery but he now believed it was the "most appropriate venue" to unveil *The Bulletin's* most-influential list because "for decades this place has been the scene of ... plotting and strategising [where] reputations are shredded over a bottle of wine [and] you can eavesdrop on other people's conversations".

Over pasta and a Pierro semillon-sauvignon blanc, the list was raked over and mocked, as such lists are. What might it say about Australia's national character that Martin Bryant and Kylie Minogue made the list, but not Edmund Barton or Joan Sutherland? Even Murdoch, in a speech accepting his honour as the most influential Australian, gently scoffed: "The journalism profession suffers from an obsession about themselves, over their consumers, and maybe this is just another example of that."

The talk of the room was the Nicole Kidman-Keith Urban wedding the previous day, which several lunch guests, including Murdoch, had attended, and, of course, the Socceroos, whose prospects were still being viewed with hope.

"Today we are all half-Italian as Australia fronts up against Niccolo Machiavelli's old team," said Costello, just 14 hours before Australia's World Cup hopes were dashed by Italy. "Let's hope the [Italian] coach doesn't employ any of Machiavelli's tactics for the Italian soccer team and the match."

The rest of Costello's carefully crafted speech was unusually upbeat. Coincidentally, both his words and Murdoch's short, off-the-cuff remarks carried a similar message of optimism for Australia's future.

Costello described Australia as "one of the most successful societies on earth in every way, politically, economically, in the quality of life ... there is so much we can be proud of." He went on to quote an assessment of Australian society by the US travel writer Bill Bryson as

"prosperous, well-ordered and instinctively egalitarian".

For Costello: "Our greatest triumphs are still in front of us."

For the Melbourne-born Murdoch, 75, now a citizen of the world, married to the Chinese Wendy Deng, living in the US, with business everywhere, the optimism was for the era we live in. "In the media we feel we are in the most exciting place in the world today. We're in an industry which is challenged by technological change which is going to bring about a better world."

He described the world as at a "tipping point", with universal internet access and broadband imminent for all. "The easy access and influence creative people have will challenge everything ... there are millions of people on the internet - mainly writing rubbish but a lot are writing words of wisdom. As you find your way around it, it is a magnificent thing to see ... We're on the cusp of a better world."

It is probably natural, in the throes of our biggest sporting moments, that Australians take a moment to inspect the national character. Ever cocky, we always like what we see, even when we don't win.

With Australia's team playing the "world game" with a chance, there was a new element to the barracking this time, as people who had always identified as Croatian-Australians or British-Australians surprised themselves by discovering a patriotic ardour when Australia scored a goal.

There was this assessment of the Australian character from the outgoing Socceroos coach, the Dutchman Guus Hiddink, yesterday morning on ABC radio as "beautiful ... the openness and being very approachable and coachable regarding football, but also in the human aspect".

And there was this assessment from Coldplay's lead singer, Chris Martin, during a concert at the Sydney Entertainment Centre on Monday night: "The thing is about Australia, they play that game like life should be lived - it's like they f---ing attack it."

There was *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer's ode to Australia on the townhall.com website this week: "A country whose Prime Minister said after 9/11, 'This is no time to be an 80 per cent ally', and actually meant it ... This is a place where, when the remains of a fallen soldier are accidentally switched with those of a Bosnian, the enraged widow picks up the phone late at night, calls the Prime Minister at home in bed and delivers a furious unedited rant - which he ... graciously accepts as fully deserved."

Against such a backdrop of global praise, it can be no surprise that a new study by the economists Andrew Leigh, of the Australian National University, and Justin Wolfers, of Wharton University in Pennsylvania, has found that only the people of Iceland are happier than Australians.

Optimism is Australia's leitmotiv for the 21st century, against a world made bleaker by terrorism but from which we have not retreated. That is why the catcall from the former trade unionist Jack Munday at Monday's *Bulletin* lunch was such a telling counterpoint. "How can the most influential Australian of all time be an American?" he yelled as Murdoch took his seat.

It was a glimpse of our parochial, timorous, chip-on-the-shoulder, past but it was laughed off as the anachronism that it was. We are not just half-Italian today, as Costello jokingly said. We

are all global citizens making our mark.

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