

This most American of all American holidays is. Many nations celebrate the day they achieved independence or the day of their founding, and so do we — on July 4. But how many other nations also set aside an additional day each year to give thanks for their collective existence?

For the thanks we give on Thanksgiving — at least in theory if not always in practice — are not for just any blessings. They are specifically directed to the blessings bestowed upon us as Americans.

But if such a holiday is unusual in itself, so too is its ability to go on compelling almost universal acceptance even at a time when the fervent patriotism it enshrines has become so much less than universally acceptable.

It is true that patriotism has staged a bit of a comeback in recent years. But it is also true that unashamed and unstinting love of country is still considered primitive, and giving vent to this feeling is still taken as a sign of bad taste.

Nevertheless, even many who are embarrassed by, or disapprove of, patriotism somehow feel obliged to celebrate a holiday dedicated to expressing the reverent gratitude of Americans, precisely at being Americans.

Here we come to another extraordinary fact about Thanksgiving: it is a religious holiday. Again, never mind that its religious character is probably honoured nowadays more in the breach than in the observance. Even so, the whole point of Thanksgiving remains what its very name says it is: to give thanks. Not to one another, not to our leaders, but to God.

One reason this is so extraordinary, of course, is that the nation for whose existence God is being thanked has no established church through which and by which it can claim divine sanction. On the contrary, it is a nation built on the separation of church and State.

Admittedly, the separation of church and State is not the same thing as the separation of religion and State. Yet that distinction has been lost in the way the principle of separation is now interpreted by the Supreme Court.

For example, although it is permissible today to pin up a poster in a classroom demonstrating the use of condoms, it is deemed a violation of the First Amendment to display the Ten Commandments on the walls of the same classroom.

Thanksgiving is also amazing. There is also the fact that Thanksgiving is based on the idea of gratitude.

There was a time when gratitude was considered a great virtue, but in contemporary America it is little esteemed and much frowned upon. Indeed, gratitude, equated by our spiritually illiterate culture with complacency, is seen as the enemy of progress toward a better world.

Ralph Ellison, whose "Invisible Man" may be the best novel ever written about black life in America, once spoke of "an American Negro tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one's anguish for sympathy or gain", and he implicitly deplored its replacement by a new style of ostentatious victimisation.

Unashamed patriotism a sign of bad taste

But blacks are not the only Americans who shared in that proud tradition and they are not the only Americans who have forgotten or turned their backs on it.

Far from being regarded as obscene, the parading of one's sufferings and the whining about one's "needs", are now encouraged as marks of a raised consciousness and as goads to desirable political action.

Thus, instead of counting our blessings and rejoicing in them (the very words seem quaint), we are commanded by contemporary moral values to work ourselves up into a state of restless dissatisfaction with the way things are and to resist a relapse into "apathy" with all our hearts and souls and might.

Why then, in spite of the powerful factors working against it, do we hold so tenaciously on to Thanksgiving? Are we trying to tell ourselves that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our contemporary philosophy? Perhaps. But in any case, it is a great wonder that Thanksgiving has not been declared unseemly by the dictators of good taste, immoral by the arbiters of moral fashion and unconstitutional by the Supreme Court.

For that, too, we ought to give thanks on this most extraordinary of American days.

I doubt whether Sir Robert Menzies, over a quarter-century ago, would have seen Ayers Rock as the symbolic face of Australia. Nor would most of his fellow Australians, except perhaps the Chamber of Commerce in Alice Springs.

It has been a slow process, this coming to terms with the arid inland, and the process is far from complete.

I believe that, in a quarter of a century hence, most Australians will be surprised at the way we now see Ayers Rock and all the arid lands for hundreds of kilometres around.

How we view the dry interior is a mirror of how we view our nation and its goals and future.

At first, there had been no thought that great deserts existed in the interior. Thus, William Charles Wentworth summed up the hopes of so many Sydney men when in 1819 he wrote that surely Australia must be like every other continent; with one or more great rivers dissecting it.

Explorers set out in the

One of the first to write of the dry inland with affection was the gifted journalist and mining promoter Randolph Bedford, and around 1900 he marvelled at Central Australia and the dry cold country of Western Australia, but

Symbols change as new priorities emerge

even he preferred his desert after rain, especially when the salt lake became a plain "rippling away in waves of crimson to the horizon, a great garden filled with pink amaranth and native lilies".

Dorothea MacKellar, about 1904, also made a revolutionary statement when she said that "I love a sunburnt country". Most other Australians didn't.

It was still seen as a national duty to develop the uninhabited lands — otherwise another nation might snatch them — but this sense of duty is rarely voiced at present, and even those who

remain largely uninhabited.

He said it so persistently that in the Federal Parliament in 1924 a member called on him to "renew from his perpetual slander on Central Australia".

Years later, Taylor, from

professor J.W. Gregory used to call our "dead heart" has also come from the global accessibility of Alice Springs and Ayers Rock and the deluge of tourists arriving in air-conditioned planes and buses.

Ironically, half a century ago, when Australia tried to advertise itself in foreign lands, it featured places that would attract immigrants.

But now it shows the places that will attract tourists. Thus, Martin Place, Burriana, Dam and the Adelaide Hills have been ousted by Ayers Rock, "Crocodile Creek" and remote places that few would-be immigrants of the 1930s dreamed of visiting, let alone living in.

Symbols change. No matter how pregnant and permanent they may seem, they can quickly be eclipsed as new nationalist emotions and priorities emerge and as new calls for economic development and new fears for the nation's security arise.

I will be surprised if, when we celebrate our 250th anniversary, the dry red heart will be such a prominent symbol.

overlaid in the communion of red-neck prejudice and garbled syntax the Queensland Nationals had to offer.

That Senator Stone was a part of all this casts a giant shadow of doubt over his judgment to begin with.

His recent statements on immigration, which flatly contradict Coalition policy, and his persistence in those comments, deeply underline the doubts about his political judgment.

While it is, of course, impossible to find a thread of consistency in the Queensland Nationals, one might point out that the decision by the Queensland National Party machine to force its parliamentary representatives in Canberra to break the Coalition with the Liberals against their own will before the last election did seem to suggest that somewhere some twisted version of a principle of party discipline was being followed.

The federal National Party politicians were forced to go against their better judgment in the interests of party discipline.

Now the Queensland Nationals have crawled back into the Coalition, and one might

have developed some reputation for narrow-mindedness, for old-fashioned colonial cringe attitudes on immigration, for a world view that is negative and fearful, for exaggerated and at times dangerous rhetoric, for gross disunity within their own party and within the Coalition, for great inconsistency of conduct, that they threaten to make it almost impossible for decent people to vote for the Coalition, knowing that the Queensland Nationals will have some influence in a Coalition government.

They are playing for the Coalition exactly the role that the Socialist Left played for the Labor Party in the 1950s and '60s.

To elect Senator Stone as leader of the federal National Party would be to increase dramatically the likelihood of these difficulties becoming overwhelming.

If the Hawke Government can maintain something like the factional discipline it displayed in its first two terms, and continue to accept the many political free gifts the Queensland Nationals offer it so regularly, then the Labor hegemony may last a very long time indeed.

Fear and bigotry may hamper historic Nazi war crimes trial

ONE of the most admirable initiatives of the Hawke Government started the legislative process this week.

After 12 months of community discussions and the subsequent Menzies report, the War Crimes Amendment Bill 1987 was introduced by the Attorney-General, Mr Bowen, this week.

Ostensibly, actions against Nazi war criminals should be a universally popular initiative.

Unfortunately, however, many fear the processes involved and are worried that the surrounding community misconceptions will damage the innocent.

Put simply, some Eastern European communities have long suffered, most unfairly, from being labelled as Nazi sympathisers because of the actions of their governments in the war years.

Ironically, of course, many of them, Jewish and non-

Jewish, were amongst the worst affected by Nazi occupation and persecution.

They, too, therefore, will want to see justice on the war crimes issue, not only like everyone else, but also to clear finally the name of their communities in their new country, Australia.

But that will not stop them from fearing ethnic bigotry, most often by other Australians, and misplaced labelling and sloppy reporting in the popular press.

In this context, therefore, the doubtless moral incumbency upon Australia to undertake this action to purge from our midst any and every war criminal is also accompanied by the moral incumbency upon us all as a society and as individuals to deal with this matter properly.

In the months ahead, two extremes will surface. Nel-

ther must be given popular acclaim.

In the first instance, some will clamour for action where doubt exists but no proof is in evidence.

On the other hand, people out of misplaced loyalties past and present will seek to provide cover for people who need to answer charges properly before the law, under the guise of supposed discrimination or age or time past.

Neither is needed nor should be allowed in Australia — there must be no lynch mobs in the streets or in the newspapers and there must be no apologists.

Herein lies the strength of the Government's legislative procedures.

Basically, the War Crimes Amendment Bill 1987 puts the processes of evidence and trial, where the onus lies for dealing with war criminals amongst our citizenry

or residents, in Australian courts.

It is, if you like, simply extending the jurisdiction of Australian courts to war crimes and treating them in a manner consistent with our own domestic processes of law.

It does not, for instance, create offences retrospectively and, importantly, it does not differ from present legal law, whereby there is no limitation on the time for bringing prosecutions for serious offences.

Importantly, there is no ground for fears that Australians of Eastern European origin would be shipped off to the Soviet Union to face trial. They will not.

The Soviet Union has agreed to facilitate such witnesses that might exist for Australian courts while the Evidence Amendment Act 1985 provides the means designed to ensure that any ev-



politicians must build on their base if the nation is not to be racked by division.

The integrity of the processes must be protected on a consistent basis.

In the months ahead, it will be the position of some to say this is too hard, it is in the past, it is too divisive, give it up.

The Nazis butchered and slaughtered over six million Jews and countless millions of others, not for their actions, not even so much for their beliefs, but simply for their existence. That was their crime.

No government or person of authority in the modern world, present or future, must ever believe that anything like Nazi atrocities will ever be accepted; not now, not in 40 years or 400 years.

The potential perpetrators of such hideous crimes must always know that their judgment will come. The war crimes trials in Australia, therefore, are as important for the future as they are for the past.

To have any moral sway on events in Africa, Asia, South America or the Pacific, Australia must do this thing and do it well.