Just where the bloody hell are we?

Tim Lindsey and Jeremy Kingsley

EDERAL politicians have been lining up to thump the tub about “Australian values” — their rhetoric driven by a desire to define “Australianess” at a time when many voters aren’t so sure what it means.

Ten years on and Prime Minister John Howard keeps hammering his “relaxed and comfortable” fantasy of cricket in the burbs.

There is hackneyed fluff about “mateship”. Peter Costello shows his religious enthusiasm by sledging Islam. Tony Abbott seems keen to form a one-man moral majority. Kim Beazley is also no slouch when it comes to jingoism.

The cliched images of Australia pushed by our leaders are often plain silly. Our society is too complex and plural to fit crude categories drawn from a largely imagined past.

There has never been one single model of Australianness and it is absurd to think there ever will be.

But asking the Australian values question generates deeply emotional and ideological responses and creates divisions among Australians of different backgrounds, as Pauline Hanson showed us.

And most of the time, the result is that non-Anglos, especially Asian and Muslim Australians, find themselves on the outer. This is because there is an assumption underlying the whole debate, often unconscious, that whatever it is to be Australian, Asia doesn’t have a lot to do with it.

This is wrong and disastrously so. We do not live in a cultural, economic or political bubble.

Outside forces inevitably affect our aspirations and identity, even though there has been little consideration of the regional and global forces that determine our national identity.

The debate so far has been largely inwardly focused, with our gaze firmly on our navels.

Australian lives are guided as much by Asia, Europe and the Americas, where our main strategic and trading partners are, as by Canberra.

The lucky country is fuelled by trade-based prosperity in flogging off our commodities and that makes Asia a player in “Australianness” because Asia is a player in our trade.

More than 19 per cent of all Australian trade is with Japan, more than $44 billion, two way.

Japanese businesses have invested more than $45 billion in Australia. This is big business and if you add in our $32 billion two-way trading with China, it gets bigger still.

And remember, our trade with the US, our main strategic ally, political leader and culture maker, is in the same ball park, at $40.6 billion.

But don’t stop there. Add in our need for security and the threat of terrorism and the importance of Asia becomes a no brainer.

More Australians were killed in the 2002 Bali bombings than in any other peace-time incident since World War II. It touched the daily lives of most Australians.

How many parents worry about going to Bali for the family holidays?

Millions of Australians have been there, but in 2002, after the first of the Bali bombings, arrivals from Australia fell from more than 20,000 per month to less than 5000.

This downturn happened within the space of one month and significantly affected the Balinese economy. Maybe this year we’ll just stick to Lorne.

The reality is that Australian values cannot be disconnected from geography.

It is unlikely Australia will ever become a member of the European Union, even if most Australians have a mental outlook that would put Australia somewhere in the mid-Atlantic between the US and England.

But despite this, the mental map is winning out over the real one. Asia is becoming less and less important in our universities and secondary schools.

Education determines future attitudes, so the curriculum today tells us how we will view our position in the world tomorrow. And it says we are becoming more insular and self-involved.

Seventy academic positions were lost from Asian studies at Australian universities over the past decade. Less than 2.9 per cent of university students take Asian studies or languages at university. Our next generation of leaders will be Asia-illiterate.

Defining ourselves to ignore Asia and stripping our capacity to deal with the key trade and security partners that surround us seems like madness.

UT neither federal nor state governments will take responsibility for reversing this gutting of Asian skills.

It is hard to create policies that will protect the prosperity Australians have enjoyed. It is much easier to talk about big fluffy ideas, such as Australian values, wave the flag and talk tough about defending our way of life.

It sure helps avoid tough questions about our place in the world.

The question is when will our government and business leaders take on the big questions and start focusing on our place in Asia?

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Chasing the dragon: Australia needs to look at Asian values.