A lot of governing left for Labor in this state

The Very Reverend Dr James Rigney is Dean of Newcastle.

Sufficient to Australia Day is the BBQ thereof

Celebrate our national day by enjoying our community, writes James Rigney.

IN theory Australia Day is an opportunity for Australians to come together to celebrate their country and culture. It is a time for reflections on the achievements of the nation and explorations of ways to make the country even greater in the future.

But unlike Anzac Day or even Melbourne Cup Day, Australia Day has never really established itself as a day that’s about helping us define and connect as Australians. Perhaps this is no bad thing. Anyway, the height of the Australian summer is probably not the best time to expect that level of intellectual analysis and communal philosophising.

What we do with our public holidays is probably a good indication of what we think those holidays are about. A recent survey indicated that 81 per cent of Swedes celebrate their national day by doing absolutely nothing. In Australia people tend to go for a picnic at the beach or a park, go shopping or play or watch sport.

In some towns and cities – and Newcastle is one of them – citizenship ceremonies are held on Australia Day. These are ceremonies to welcome to the country those who have been granted Australian citizenship. Although they are official occasions, these ceremonies often have a festive atmosphere.

This year’s Newcastle ceremonies take place against the background of confirmed reports of community hostility and incitement towards international students in the city.

In a study specially commissioned by the University of Newcastle into the impact of overseas students on the community, staff said they believed students may not be welcome in surrounding suburbs. The report made 18 recommendations to address this problem.

At the moment many probably feel troubled by the state of our society, and find themselves wondering how we can imagine ourselves as a nation or hold together as a nation. The immediate risk is that we think that the way to hold ourselves together is to be even more suspicious of strangers or people who are in any way different.

Instead what is called for is an enjoyment of the community. Such an attitude of enjoyment makes it possible to share the burdens of others and welcome the presence of the stranger.

Shared sociability is the key idea here: everything, in other words, that is epitomised by going for a picnic to the beach or to a park, or going or playing or watching sporting events, doing the things people do on Australia Day.

There’s a risk if we become dissatisfied with Australia Day on the grounds that it lacks analysis. The risk is that we find ourselves seeking a fake and unauthentic meaning for the day. In fact, the meaning of Australia Day could lie in the things that we naturally do.

The prophet Isaiah warned the people of Israel against a way of life driven by anxiety and competition. His answer for them was simple: In returning and rest you shall be saved. (Isaiah 30:15) This Australia Day that advice still has force for us.

Today’s fact

Killer whales stay within their family groups for their entire lives.

Today’s word

Preponderate: To be greater in influence, quantity, or number. To exceed in weight.

It happened today

From our files – 1996: A Guatemalan killer is too frightened to go swimming after 25 sea urchins come embedded in her foot at Belmont.

Today in history

1848: Last convict ship to Port Phillip in Victoria, the Marion, disembarks its passengers.

1924: First Winter Olympics opened at Chamonix, France.

1942: Full mobilisation ordered in Australia. The threat of a Japanese invasion and the proximity of Japanese forces to Australia demand an increased commitment from the government and public.

1974: Start of major flooding in Brisbane in which 11 die.

1992: Russian president Boris Yeltsin says Russia will stop targeting US cities with nuclear missiles.

2001: Australian astronaut Andy Thomas moves from the space shuttle Endeavour into the Russian space station Mir to relieve his US colleague David Wolf.

2002: India successfully test fires an intermediate range ballistic missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.

2006: Astronomers detect OGLE-2001-BLG-619Lb, the most Earth-like planet around a star other than our own.

Born today

Edmund Campion, English Jesuit (1540-1591); Robert Burns, Scottish poet (1759-1796); W. Somerset Maugham, English author (1874-1965); Virginia Woolf, English author (1882-1941); Karin Colette, pictured, Australian sailor (1894-1914); Alicia Keys, US singer (1981-).

Odd spot

Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates has started tweeting. Gates bade the Twitter community a “Hello World” and then proved that message with three more lauding earthquake-devastated Haiti.

Today’s text

My dear friend, do not imitate what is bad, but imitate what is good. Whoever does good belongs to God; whoever does what is bad has not seen God. (1 John: 11)