AUSTRALIA is an extraordinarily diverse society. By chance the other day, I was the only person who was born in Australia among a group of six having lunch. The others were born in Hong Kong, Colombia, Argentina, Spain and New Zealand.

To add to the mix, the New Zealander was of Indian descent. Of course, some of the other diners in the cafe, or the waiters, found the mix surprising.

Australia is increasingly like this, isn’t it? And the better for it.

The chatter between us was typical lunchtime stuff until my friend referred to Australians remarked that she was surprised at the sense of entitlement by born-and-bred Australians, especially their feeling that governments had a responsibility to provide you with the basic set of life’s necessities.

My friend referred to Australians’ expectation that health and education services be freely available and that income support be provided for the unemployed, the sick and disabled, and the aged, without too much fuss.

My dining companions all agreed with her that the Australians are unrealistic.

Maybe it’s a First World thing, my friend thought-colonial observed.

Maybe we come from countries with a legal tradition to provide a basic entitlement of services and income to all the population, she added.

And my friend from Hong Kong chimed in that he was surprised when he came to Australia how embedded in Australian thinking was the idea that governments would always be there and always have the money to provide free public health care and education, and a platform of income support.

The group also pointed out that we were living up to the idea – that Australians expect their governments to be benevolent, to act in their interests, while many new migrants remain suspicious of governments. Often migrants come from nations where governments are oppressive, run by power-soaked generals or political elites that rule by fear, that are takers not givers.

Unlike the delicious fish I ate, the lunchtime conversation has come back to me over and over. Yes, I do take the presence of government in our lives for granted.

Yes, I do expect governments to provide basic services and income support. And so I support a comprehensive taxation system to fund it all, and I pay my fair share of tax without too much whingeing.

Still, I look to my books and to the internet to check just how much governments in Australia do take responsibility for those in need.

The answers, as ever, aren’t clear.

The best guide to this stuff is the Australian Treasury’s material that examines options for the nation’s future tax system. You’ll find it on Treasury’s website, along with scores of well-argued submissions.

Treasury’s material shows up the many contradictions in our taxation and welfare system. There is evidence that we are pretty mean by world standards. Of the world’s 30 richest nations Australia ranks ninth from the bottom in terms of the proportion of national income spent on social welfare. Yet we win the gold medal when it comes to targeting government spending. Treasury charts show we get a higher proportion – bigger than any other nation – of welfare spending into the bank accounts of the nation’s poorest 20 per cent of households.

All well and good, says the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), in its submission to the Treasury inquiry, but try living off social security payments, it goes. We were surprised, to be honest, just how miserable these entitlements are.

The single pension for retirees, people with disabilities, carers and sole parents is $284 per week; the Newstart Allowance (the dole) is $252 per week; while Austudy is only $110 per week.

These aren’t generous, are they? Treasury’s documents tell us that Australia’s system of income support began during the 1940s when Labor prime ministers John Curtin and Ben Chifley rolled out the safety net.

— Artwork by Anwsle Wildschut

Rich and poor, left or right, Australia’s system of income support has evolved in different ways ever since, although the basic shape of the net remains the same today as it was when the Great Leaders weld it in place way back then.

I’m sort of proud that my dining companions, our newer Australians, noticed the support we give those in need. I’m taken aback, though, that they think we take it all for granted.

I’m concerned, too, that the support we offer isn’t as generous as we can afford.

Our Great Leaders would be alarmed at our complacency. But take a closer look at the Treasury’s tax and welfare review hadn’t we, and have our say?

Professor Philip O’Neill is director of the Urban Research Centre, University of Western Sydney.

OPINION & ANALYSIS

Safety net Down Under

just taken for granted

There is wealth to be gained from nurture, writes Kate Bartlett.

RECENT stories about violence towards international students in Australian universities have been shocking to many. As a new chaplain at the University of Newcastle, I have found them particularly disturbing.

Some of our local students have been complicit in bullying of reportedly quite young people, resulting in robbery and harassment. A mature student was attacked while walking in the university campus area with his young child. When asked whether he was hurt his response was “my feelings were hurt. I am worried that my son will grow up fearing every white person will attack him.”

Thankfully, for most of our international students, this isn’t the norm. The inclusion of students from many different countries and cultures provides a wonderful opportunity to learn from each other. Most of the students whom I have asked have responded very positively about the welcome and help received from locals during their time at the university.

When I attend Mass at university each week it is not unusual to be in the company of people from seven different countries with myriad life stories. The richness of this shared experience really brings to life the act of coming together as a universal church.

Each week after we have nurtured our souls by gathering in worship, we join together around the Chaplaincy Centre’s table to share a meal. These meals are a great opportunity to learn about each other and each other’s culture. Often the information gleaned in these informal times is the kind of thing that tourist guides never tell you – the insider’s view – for better and for worse.

One story that contrasts strongly with the recent tales of racism and unpleasant behaviour towards international students was the experience I had of a student from Papua New Guinea expressing her gratitude for the AusAID scholarship that made her study here possible. It was truly humbling to see her, with tears in her eyes, give thanks for the people of Australia who had made her education possible. She spoke of her great desire to return to her own country armed with the knowledge and skills gained here and use them to help improve the lives of others in her struggling community.

I am nearing the end of my first semester as a chaplain but already my life and my faith have been enriched by the experience. I pray that all people in Newcastle and beyond will open their hearts and minds. May we all be enriched by the opportunities that we may have to share the journey with international students.

Kate Bartlett is a Catholic chaplain at the University of Newcastle.

SUPPORT: Labor’s John Curtin, right, and Ben Chifley rolled out the safety net.

PHOTO: Artwork by Anwsle Wildschut