n the last day of the 2009 financial
year around one third of the adult
population of Australia purchased
at least one ticket in the country’s
largest-ever lottery, which was
advertised as having the potential to
deliver to the winner an amazing $90
million. The lottery was so popular that around
10 million tickets were sold, pushing the proceeds of it to
$106 million. The prize was shared between two people
who wisely opted to remain anonymous. (Although how
one would conceal from family and friends suddenly
being $53 million richer would require a great deal more
ingenuity than picking the winning numbers.)

On the day of the lottery a radio station in Darwin
contacted me. They wanted to interview me about an
essay I had written, On Luck.* Why, the announcer asked,
are Australians so obsessed with the idea of luck? It was
a clever take on the day’s biggest story, to pull back from
the frenzied queues at newsagents and ask the bigger
question: what’s going on here?

After all, there have been endless articles telling us
that we had a better chance (1 in 20 million) of being
canonised, and quite promising odds (1 in 11,500) of
winning an Oscar, whereas the chances of winning this
lottery were 1 in 45 million. In fact, “LOTTO is the only
form of gambling where the chances of winning are only
very slightly improved by buying a ticket,” commented
a blogger on the Sharesguru website, a space generally
devoted to information about the stock market but which
on this occasion hosted a forum on the unprecedented
lucre offered by the lottery.

Undeterred, the optimists lined up to hand over
something in the order of $170 million (60 per cent of the
take is returned as winnings), in the hope of getting rich
quickly and with little effort.

It has always been thus. Australians have had a get-rich-
quick mentality ever since the first white toe tested the
waters of Sydney Cove. Our appetite for gambling, which
our forebears must have brought with them, soon became
naturalised. In 1808 a visitor to the colony observed, “To
such excesses was the pursuit of gambling carried among
the convicts that some have been known, after losing
money, provisions, and all their clothing [sic], to have
staked their cloaths upon their wretched backs, standing in
the midst of their associates naked…”

Losing their shirts did not discourage the convicts from
gambling and nothing in the past 211 years has deterred
the exponential growth of our love of a chance for easy
money. So much so that Australians today are the greatest
gamblers on earth. We spend (and hence, also lose) more
per capita than any other nation. Our losses for 2005-06
(the last year for which figures are available) totaled $17.5
billion—or $1122 for every man, woman and child in this
wide brown land. Our gambling losses exceed household
savings, by a long shot.

As a country we are profoundly addicted to the idea that
we are lucky. When Donald Horne published The Lucky
Country back in 1964 we embraced the term with ardour.
We ignored the fact that Horne had used the term ironically

* The Australian attitude to luck is bizarre and has to change, writes
**Anne Summers AO (PhD ’79)**
— to jolt us out of our complacency and alert us to the need for major change. Instead it has become a cliché for the way we want to see ourselves. You hear it everywhere: we say it out loud, standing around the barbecue, the seafood plentiful, the wine chilled, the sky blue. In all sorts of conversations, in Qantas ads, from the mouths of travellers returning from overseas trips full of complaints.

“We are so lucky,” people say, pointing to our relaxed and comfortable lifestyle, the physical beauty, our lack of major social tensions or economic polarisation, our relatively benign climate, the protection afforded by geographic isolation and island status. These claims do not withstand close scrutiny, but they are central to the romance that luck defines us and drives us and that we are somehow blessed. Within this narrative, while there may be losers, they are the exceptions that confirm the rule. As a country, we are lucky.

Why did we embrace this term so ardently? There have been many other books about Australia that have used other phrases to describe us, but none has had such enduring power. We want to think of ourselves as lucky. It accords with the sentimental view we have of ourselves. It has been a consolation for us to think of ourselves as lucky, when we could just as easily have concluded the opposite. We could have believed we were unlucky to be so far from Europe and the United States, for never having gone through the nation-building exercise of a war of independence, for not having the challenges of a smaller territory or a larger population. Perhaps because we have always secretly harboured the fear that Australia Felix is a self-reinforcing myth, and that we needed to camouflage our insecurity, we seized upon Donald Horne’s term as if it were a life raft; and we have floated, more or less comfortably, upon it for the past 40-odd years.

It became our legend. We placed our faith in a gambling term. We made a decision, in effect, to take a flutter on the future. It was very seductive to think of ourselves as graced, as Godzone. It also helped us cope with adversity, such as drought or fire or bank failure, as we could console ourselves that these were unusual and temporary aberrations to our normal run of good luck.

It led us to develop a wry and laconic humour that has become a distinctively Australian way of dealing with misfortune. In his classic stories of Dad and Dave and Mum, barely scratching out a living on their selection, Steele Rudd told of ruinous events with a sardonic humour. At the same time, especially for our governments, it justified complacency, and failure to notice the profound changes occurring in our region and in our world. We encased ourselves in a self-satisfied cocoon of contentment; secure in the belief that luck would see us through.

Nowhere is this more evident than in our attitude to Australia’s prodigious mineral and energy resources. Nothing irritated Donald Horne more than people’s easy assumption that he had been referring to the nation’s resources when he used the term “lucky country”. In fact, he wrote in 1976, “When I invented the phrase in 1964 to describe Australia I said ‘Australia is a lucky country run by second-rate people who share its luck’. I didn’t mean that it
Our propensity for eternal optimism is constantly reinforced. Our unemployment rates are not as high as predicted; consumer spending is on the up; China’s economy remains relatively robust. So what’s to worry about? It takes a lot for Australians to look on the dark side of things. So much so that our leaders are taking remarkable steps to try to force us to face the future differently.

Earlier this year, Reserve Bank governor Glenn Stevens, in a speech entitled “Road to Recovery”, told us it was time to get realistic about how we can thrive in future: “We cannot achieve effortless prosperity either on the back of ever-escalating mineral prices or simply by bidding up the prices of our houses,” he said. “It is as well to realise that”.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was far more blunt. In a long and remarkable essay published in late July 2009 in both the *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, he said we had no choice but to abandon our lucky country mindset. “In the past, Australia relied almost exclusively on the rollercoaster of the boom and bust of the mining sector on the stock market,” he wrote. “Instead, Australia needs to build stable foundations for growth by reforming the economy to enhance long-term productivity growth, the only reliable driver of long-term improvements in national living standards”. In other words, we can no longer rely on luck and, in this case, luck is essentially a metaphor for our mineral resources.

Instead we are being told we have to shift in a quite fundamental way how the Australian economy operates and, concomitantly, how we think about ourselves. No longer able to rely on luck, we are going to have to roll up our sleeves and get to work, build ourselves a very different sort of economy. Will we be able to do it?

We have never avoided the hard work that was needed to build the nation but we have chosen to represent ourselves differently: as the beneficiaries of good fortune rather than of honest toil. We want to think of ourselves in a certain way, and it is this attitude that will be very hard to shift. We seem to need to believe that our wealth was acquired effortlessly, perhaps so the rest of the world would see us as an antipodean paradise.

Our propensity for eternal optimism is constantly reinforced.
Was it our way of compensating for the “tyranny of distance”, the geographical dice that placed us on the edge of the world, a good three hours by jet from our nearest neighbours and a full day’s flying from the centres of Europe and the United States? Was it another sign of our insecurity, accurately if cruelly derided in the early 1980s by Lee Kwan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore, when he called us the “lotus eaters of the South Pacific”? We advertised ourselves as lucky which, when you think about the randomness involved in such good fortune, was another way of boasting of being lazy. All that bounty for no effort. Just like winning the lottery.

To try to understand why Australians are so susceptible to the notion of our luck, we perhaps have to go back to the gold rushes of the mid-19th century, because it was then that many of the traits of our national character were formed.

Being a nation of immigrants, most of us are descended from people who came to Australia hoping to improve their circumstances; but nowhere was this more the case than with those people who rushed to NSW and, in even greater numbers, to Victoria, hoping to get rich quickly. In the 10 years between 1851 and 1861 the population trebled as fortune hunters flocked to the antipodes. Most of the increase occurred in Victoria where the population rose from 11,738 in 1841 to 540,322 in 1861. Such an influx could not fail to have a dramatic impact on the country, on both the land itself and on the conduct and morality of the people.

Henry Handel Richardson’s epic goldfields trilogy, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, brilliantly described this impact. *Australia Felix*, the first novel, described the physical and psychic ruin that befell so many of the diggers. So much of who we are was formed in those two decades: the iconic term “digger”, our hatred of authority as encapsulated in the 1854 Eureka Stockade rebellion, our reliance on bureaucracy in the form of the diggers’ licenses that prompted the rebellion; the fluidity of our class system which accepts and even applauds the idea that people can, through sheer luck, become wealthy overnight.

Another interesting aspect of the Australia of the gold rush period was the preponderance of Chinese. In 1861, one in 30 of the population was Chinese, with huge numbers having travelled from southern China to Xin Jin Shan, or New Gold Mountain, as opposed to depleted California – the old mountain. These days, the Chinese are still intimately involved in the extraction of Australia’s mineral resources, but in a far more corporatised way.

There can be no doubt that the gold rushes had an important and not necessarily positive impact on the evolving Australian character. “Balaarat [sic] was a Nuggety Eldorado for the few, a ruinous field of hard labour for many, a profound ditch of perdition for Body and Soul to all,” wrote Raffaello Carboni, the Italian writer who provided the only eyewitness account of the Eureka Stockade. He could have been describing us today. We became obsessed with money early in our history and this obsession has never left us.

We are far more interested in the material than the spiritual. Even before the gold rush, Charles Darwin observed that Australians’ only interest seemed to be money, but it was in the goldfields that we began to see our national fortunes as being inextricably bound with what lies beneath, and to be unperturbed by the precarious nature of such wealth. All you need is a bit of luck: to locate the stuff, be able to dig it up, find customers for it, hope that prices don’t collapse and other nations don’t undermine us; that the boom lasts far into the future. We acquired this way of thinking early in our history, and it will be very hard to discard.

As is our national obsession with gambling which, of course, has nothing at all to with luck. Gambling is all about odds and most forms of gambling involve odds that are so stacked against the punter that you wonder why anyone bothers. Two-up is the only game that delivers anything back to the players. Everything else involves a cut for the house, a commission for the seller in the case of lotteries and, the biggest player of them all, state governments which in 2006 took in a staggering $4.6 billion from all forms of gambling. No one is more addicted to gambling than our governments, whose take has doubled in the past 20 years and will continue to increase as long as Australians ignore odds as long as one in 45 million and insist on believing they have a chance of winning. Kevin Rudd might be urging us to stop thinking we’ll get lucky and start getting seriously productive but his state counterparts have a stake, and a very high one, in our ongoing romance of our luck. And if the massive response to the lottery on 30 June is anything to go by, it will be very difficult to make us give it up.


*All footnotes and references are included with the online version at the SAM website.*