Australia Day and National Identity

- Mark Pearson -

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Disclaimer

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degrees.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Mark Pearson

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Synopsis

This dissertation argues that the scope and substance of the celebration of Australia Day this century can be explained using theories of national identity and invented tradition. It draws upon the columns of capital city newspapers in selected years to gauge how Australians celebrated their national day and what they thought about its significance. The dissertation argues that for most of this century Australia Day failed to make its mark on the national calendar because Australians’ perceptions of their nationality were inextricably tied to their feelings of kinship with the British people. Australia Day was identified more with the hedonism its public holiday facilitated than with any widespread feeling of patriotism. However, the dissertation notes a recent shift in the theme of Australia Day to a celebration of migration, arrival and rebirth which indicates that the day may have struck a chord of genuine popular resonance.
Introduction
There is something laconically Australian about the heedless and unexcited way in which the national birthday is observed and enjoyed. Given such an occasion, Americans might mangle each other with fireworks. In Germany Herr Hitler or the grim old President might make fiery speeches to massed parades in uniform ... In Australia, the national holiday means for many a little longer in bed in the morning, a day on the beach, and, probably, a sunburnt back on the morrow.

- *West Australian*, January 26, 1932, p.6

...a nation’s identity is derived from the ways in which history has, as it were, counterpointed certain opposite potentialities; the ways in which it lifts this counterpoint to a unique style of civilization, or lets it disintegrate into mere contradiction.

- Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, Ringwood, 1975, p.277
It is Thursday, January 26, 1989. It is Australia's national day - Australia Day. Yet most Australians are at work. Many will not reflect upon the day and its meaning until the following Monday - the day most State Governments have designated a public holiday in the "land of the long weekend". Most will not consider its meaning at all. Intellectuals use the columns of the newspapers as a forum to debate the meaning of Australia Day. They argue over whether the need for a public holiday should take precedence over the need to celebrate the nation's birthday on the actual anniversary of its birth. The debate is a familiar one. Some call for a new national day. Some suggest January 1, the anniversary of the foundation of the Commonwealth. Yet the newspapers over the next few days contain stories about citizenship ceremonies, multi-cultural parades, honours lists and Australians at leisure on their public holiday. Many people have used the national birthday to become Australian citizens, while others have taken the opportunity to demonstrate their national identity in a variety of other ways.

For much of this century Australia Day has been a nagging annual headache for some intellectuals, including newspaper editors. The day, purportedly the annual celebration of a nation, has been notable for its lack of focus and its inability to inspire a nation-wide demonstration of patriotic fervour. To use 1960s American terminology, Australians have generally been "party poopers" on their national birthday. Instead of waving flags at public ceremonies, most have chosen to picnic, sunbake or watch sports events.
This dissertation looks to national identity and invented tradition in search of an explanation for the vacant significance of Australia Day for much of this century and its apparent growth in significance in recent years. The thesis identifies three key themes relevant to the study of Australian national identity and Australia Day. They are kinship, radical nationalism and hedonism. It shows how Australians lacked a clear vision of their collective identity because of these complex and often contradictory themes; and how the interplay between them underlay the celebration of the national day.

Australians have found it hard to grasp what they are celebrating on January 26. For the first half of this century their feeling of affinity with Britain was intertwined with their allegiance to their nation. While civic leaders urged Australians to wave flags and march on their national day, most preferred to pursue leisure and pleasure on the designated public holiday which usually fell on the following Monday. The dissertation examines how these themes find reflection in newspaper coverage of Australia Day on selected years this century. My thesis is that newspaper coverage of Australia Day highlights these fundamental complexities and contradictions in Australian national identity, which significantly undermined the impact of Australia Day until recently, when the national day has taken on a new role as a celebration of migration, arrival and rebirth.

In one of the few scholarly articles written about Australia Day, Ken Inglis proposes that we can learn a great deal about Australians by observing their ceremonies.¹ This study aims to contribute to that learning process by looking at the Australia Day ceremonies and debates with a different focus to Inglis’s study - the focus of national identity.

Chapter 1 explores international theories of nation, nationalism and national identity. The concept of "invented tradition" proposed by British historian Eric Hobsbawm is addressed. Chapter 2 introduces the three themes of kinship, radical nationalism and hedonism. Theories about what it means to be an Australian are examined, with a strong focus on those proposed since the 1890s. The chapter examines recent writings which suggest that national identity is constructed or manipulated to meet the ends of the socially powerful. While it is granted that this most certainly occurs, the structuralist premise of these writings is challenged with an argument that a complex matrix of factors enters into the formation of a national identity: we need to go beyond manipulations by the powerful to consider how people themselves can exercise their own agency on questions of nationhood. Chapter 3 looks at national days in a comparative context and examines the two other candidates for the title "national day" this century - Empire Day and Anzac Day. Chapter 4 traces the chronological development of the celebration of Australia Day and gives an account of the main themes of debate about the significance of the day. Chapters 5 to 8 draw upon the theoretical issues already explored to develop a case study of newspaper coverage of Australia Day in representative years this century. In analysing newspaper coverage of Australia's national day, the case study chapters attempt to ascertain what Australians were doing on their national day and what they were saying (or writing) about being an Australian. The Conclusion draws together the major issues and poses questions about the role of the national day as Australia heads towards a century where concerns about nation and national identity may become anachronisms.
Primary research for the case study chapters is concentrated on the columns of capital city daily newspapers on selected years this century. The newspapers selected were: the *Advertiser* (Adelaide), the *Age* (Melbourne), the *Australian* (national), the *Canberra Times*, the *Courier-Mail* and its predecessor the *Daily Mail* (Brisbane), the *Mercury* (Hobart), the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *West Australian* (Perth). Each was selected because it was an established quality newspaper in its capital city circulation area throughout the period, with the exception of the *Australian* and the *Canberra Times* which began later but were included because of their claims to being "national newspapers".

A year was selected from each decade since the 1920s. The years selected were 1922, 1932, 1942, 1955, 1969, 1976 and 1989. Of course, no single year can be seen as being truly representative of its decade. However, the selected years stood out as better candidates for selection because most could be readily identified with important historical events or significant shifts in the celebration of national days. The years selected and the reasons for selection were as follows:

**1922:** At this stage Australia Day did not exist as a national day. It was celebrated to different degrees and under different names in the various States. The year was selected to gauge how the anniversary of British settlement was celebrated before there was a designated "Australia Day". It was also selected because, historically, it was a relatively unremarkable year in its decade and the reportage of January 26 celebrations were unlikely to be influenced by major political or economic shifts.

**1932:** This was chosen because it was Australia Day's first year of celebration officially using that name. Also, as a mid-depression year, it
provides an interesting study of perceptions of national identity in a time of national crisis.

1942: This year serves a similar function a decade later. It fell mid-war, in the midst of the perceived Japanese threat. Australia Day fell just six weeks after the Japanese attack upon Pearl Harbour and only days after Japanese troops had overcome the Australians defending Rabaul on January 22. It was important to see what implications this had for the celebration of the national day.

1955: This year was chosen because it fell in the aftermath of the Korean War and the Petrov affair. Australia Day 1955 was celebrated just a year after the Australian visit of Queen Elizabeth II, providing an insight into allegiances to Britain in the mid-1950s.

1969: This was during the Vietnam War, in the midst of a nationalistic drive by Prime Minister Gorton and prior to the election of the Whitlam Government.

1976: This provided an interesting contrast with 1969 because it was in the immediate aftermath of the Whitlam Government’s sacking.

1989: This was chosen because it was the year after the Bicentenary and provided some indication of current trends in the reportage and celebration of Australia Day.

Articles written about Australia Day fall into two categories: those reporting the events and celebrations which took place on the national day and those analysing or commenting upon those events and celebrations and the meaning of the national day. It should, however, be noted that the newspaper records are themselves constructs. Journalists and editors may choose to
ignore aspects of Australia Day because they do not deem them newsworthy or because there are political or commercial forces of influence. However, in this dissertation the debate over news values and the political or commercial manipulation of the columns of newspapers will not be addressed in any detail. Rather, this is essentially a study of complex and often contradictory ideas about national identity, the communication of those ideas and their effects on Australians’ behaviour on their national day. Such ideas have been communicated through the media, education systems, the writing of history, popular culture and other social institutions. Their effects can be seen in capital city newspaper columns covering the celebration of Australia Day and in intellectuals’ debate over the significance of the day.

In *The Pursuit of History*, John Tosh writes that one of the strongest bonds uniting a large social grouping is its members’ awareness of a common history. He ties this desire for unity to what he describes as "the most powerful group identification in modern times - the nation", adding that "history is probably a stronger force than language in the moulding of national consciousness". A major part of this dissertation focusses upon newspaper coverage of a national day which celebrates a significant event in Australia’s history. I argue that for much of this century complexities and contradictions in Australians’ perceptions of their national identity have tended to weaken their feeling of such a "common history" and consequently have worked to substitute manifestations of hedonism or apathy for the kinds of patriotism which might be expected on the anniversary of the nation’s birth. Only more recently, with changes in kinship patterns and the passage of time, has Australia Day contributed to a sense of national identity.

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