Chapter Eight:
Newspaper Coverage of Australia Day in 1989
An historical consideration of newspaper coverage of Australia Day as recently as 1989 must be prefaced with a note of caution. It is understood that the historian’s own political, social and psychological environment must influence his or her approach to the subject. With that in mind, this writer has made a conscious effort to apply the same process of analysis to the 1989 coverage as was applied to the other case study years.

The hedonism associated with Australia Day became a major political issue in 1989. Its very identity as the January long weekend was challenged by the NSW Premier, Nick Greiner, who led the call for the public holiday to fall on January 26 each year, rather than on the following Monday. The *Australian* reported,

> In a scathing attack on the other States, Mr Greiner said the nation should start taking its national day seriously and realise it meant something more than "our commitment to the land of the great weekend"..."It’s about time we bloody well grew up and decided to celebrate our national day on the day it falls rather than on a Monday which provides a long weekend," Mr Greiner said.¹

It was not a new argument. Since its inception under the name "Australia Day" in 1932, there had been calls for the national holiday to fall on January 26, whether or not it made a long weekend. There were clear political motives for Greiner’s stand on the issue. His government was in crisis over the forced resignation of a minister. However, Greiner had made the appropriate choice of words in his rhetoric with the suggestion that Australia needed to "grow up". The personification of the nation state nearing maturity sat well with the other reportage of Australia Day in 1989. Greiner also took action to accompany the rhetoric. New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory

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¹ *Australian*, January 24, 1989, p.10.
and the Northern Territory went it alone and celebrated Australia Day on Thursday, January 26, 1989, doing away with the long weekend. Queensland reluctantly agreed to follow the example from 1990. Victoria refused because it would disrupt industry. When the Prime Minister, Mr Hawke, gave his bipartisan support to Greiner’s call, the story became front page news in the *Age* and the *Mercury* on January 27. The nation’s cartoonists, editorialists and letter writers took up the issue. The *Australian*’s Bill Mitchell drew a typical Aussie threatening the Prime Minister with the words: "Buy Australian? I will, the minute I get back from my four-day Australia Day break.” 2 The *Mercury*’s Kev drew a frustrated Prime Minister exclaiming to another typical Australian: "Captain Phillip landed on the 26th!!!" The Aussie replies: "Bewdy!...He’s just in time for our long weekend barbie!" 3 The *Age* cartoonist depicted a child sailing a tallship down the gutter to celebrate Australia Day while commuters were trudging along Collins Street. 4

The *Courier-Mail*’s editorial writer asked readers to imagine the outcry from the Returned Services League if the Anzac Day celebration was moved around to accommodate a long weekend,

April 25, 1915 occupies a special place in Australian history; it is inconceivable that the commemorations could ever take place on any other day. Yet we blithely rearrange our other historical celebration to suit the Australian penchant for the three-day break... If we have grown up as a nation - and 1988 seemed to suggest we have - then it is high time we celebrated our birthday on the day it falls. 5

It is important to note the "grown up" personification of the nation and the reference to the fact that the national navel-gazing of the bicentennial year

provided evidence that Australia had reached maturity. (The writer perceptively noted that the Queensland Government was taking the easy option by gazetting the holiday on its true day for the following year. The next four Australia Days would fall on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday, giving Queenslanders their long weekend for at least the next four years.) The *West Australian* compared the traditional switch of days to accommodate a long weekend with celebrating Christmas Day on the Monday nearest to December 25. The editorial read:

> Australia Day should be an occasion for celebration, unity and quiet reflection on our national heritage. That is not likely to happen unless we commemorate it on the right day.6

The *Advertiser’s* editorial writer invoked the long weekend image of "the hedonistic fumes of barbies and highway traffic and the tired and burnt bodies and frazzled brains."7 The *Canberra Times* editorialist wrote that the inconsistency in the celebration throughout the nation was indicative of the status of Australia Day. It was held in lower regard than Anzac Day.

> That we commemorate Australia Day with sports events and public displays of jollity suggests not so much a spirit of patriotism, but a notion that we want to forget our humble beginnings and shake off the collective misery that marked them.8

The *Mercury* proselytised that by thinking of Australia Day as just another long weekend Australians were "sabotaging any hope of the celebration having meaning, of playing a role in bringing Australians together".9 The founder of the First Fleet Re-enactment Project, Jonathan King, wrote to the

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Australian in defence of Australia Day, quoting US president Thomas Jefferson who said "The way a nation celebrates its anniversaries is a statement to the world of its own sense of destiny". A letter writer to the Australian called the long weekend issue a "five-day disgrace" because the nation was effectively on leave from the Thursday through to the following Monday. He finished with a familiar call to make January 1 - the anniversary of Federation - the true national day. The Australian's editorialist had the same idea, writing that it was "appropriate to count one's blessings by observing a national day at the very start of a New Year". Another letter writer ended the debate which questioned the relevance of nationhood at the end of the twentieth century: "Australia, like all countries needs a national day ..." (Australian editorial, 26/1) Why do countries need a national day?"  

Despite criticism of the hedonism of the long weekend, Australians continued the tradition of devoting the public holiday to pleasure and leisure. The end of January remained prominent in the nation's sporting calendar. Many Sydneysiders used their Thursday off to watch Australian cricket captain Allan Border bowl out seven West Indians for just 46 runs. Other couch potatoes saved their television sports viewing - cricket, tennis or general sportscasts - for the weekend. Some sports events were specially organised for the national celebrations. Sydney's traditional Anniversary Day Regatta (note the original name was still being used) was complemented by the Amatil Ferrython and the ANZ 12-metre challenge. The commercial sponsorship shows one construction of national identity. The 12-metre yacht

race shows another. The match between America’s Dennis Conner and Australian Iain Murray rekindled memories of the America’s Cup victory of 1983, an event which demonstrated how sport can ignite patriotic fervour in Australians. Hobart’s Sandy Bay Regatta Association chairman joined the public holiday controversy, claiming a change of Australia Day dates would benefit the annual event.14 Canberra held an Australia Day Sports Carnival, featuring 7,000 athletes participating in 35 sporting contests. It was the basis of an eight-page advertising supplement in the Canberra Times.15

The hedonistic manifestation of national identity extended to fairs, picnics and parties throughout the nation. The Goombungee Showground in southeast Queensland was the scene of the International Alfoil Lady Championships and the International Farmers’ Ironman Championships16, while in Port Pirie in South Australia they held raft races and sandcastle competitions.17 Canberra was the venue for the inaugural Australian Breeds Australia Day Championship Dog Show, reflecting an ongoing fascination with things Australian.18 Thousands of Brisbane residents celebrated an Australia Day Beach Party on an artificial beach in New Farm Park while the songs of the American band, the Beach Boys, blasted through the speakers.19 Sydneysiders braved storms to watch an outdoor performance of "Les Misérables".20 Other tunes were played at Tamworth’s annual Country Music Festival. There were fireworks displays in Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth and Sydney, while Canberra’s Skyshow '89 started its own fireworks of a

different kind. The larrikin spirit of earlier days came to the fore with the arrest of 15 people at the fireworks display for assaulting police, drunkenness and offensive behaviour.21

Australians performed rituals in attempts to instill some tradition into the Australia Day ceremonies. There were parades through the cities, with the Age blaming overcast conditions for the disappointing attendance at the Melbourne procession22 and the Advertiser blaming 37°C heat for its poor participation level.23 Official flag-raising ceremonies were held. But in the national capital printed copies of Advance Australia Fair had to be distributed so the crowds could actually sing the national anthem.24 Organisers of Hobart’s Sandy Bay Regatta "added pomp to patriotism" by featuring a naval guard of honour for the Deputy Premier, presenting citizenship awards and conducting citizenship ceremonies.25

Two rituals performed on the day confirmed the demise of the British connection. They were the announcement of the recipients of Australia Day Honours and the performance of citizenship ceremonies throughout the nation, also reported as part of the 1976 Australia Day ceremonies. The list of recipients reinforced the theme of hedonism. They included sports men and women, a lone sailor and the organisers of the nation’s longest-running party, Expo 88.26 The West Australian’s columnist Tim Atkinson bemoaned the demise of the knighthood and the rise of the Australia Day honours when he wrote that the letter combination "OA conjures up visions of something for

only adults. A bit smutty. Risque rather than righteous." 27 About 7000 residents became Australian citizens at 200 citizenship ceremonies held in council chambers and community halls around the country on Australia Day. 28 The ceremonies could be read as representing the transition of kinship ties from a British to a multicultural base and further shift towards the celebration of migration, arrival and rebirth, the new lifeblood of Australia Day activities.

Newspapers indulged in their own rituals as they had in previous years. The Canberra Times featured a photograph of 3580gm Australia Day baby Tansy Skidmore with her parents and brother. 29 The Courier-Mail stretched the birthday idea to its limits with a photo story on 89 year old Cecil Hauff who was born on January 26, 1900. 30 The same newspaper revived the near-defunct entity of the Page Three girl and elevated her to page one, holding an Australian flag. The heading read: "It’s no holiday - but today’s the day to fly the flag." The flag, unfortunately, was flying backwards. 31

Many aspects of the celebrations harked back to other definitions of Australia and Australians. There were references to the digger legend. The Australian reported a family’s efforts to have the Victoria Cross posthumously awarded to a lieutenant who took the fatal blast of a mine to save the lives of his troops during the Vietnam War. The heading read: "Digger gave life for mates." 32 The article followed a photo-story the previous day featuring an Australian soldier standing guard at an historic garrison on

30. Courier-Mail, January 24, 1989, p.4
the Brisbane River. In another example of the Anzac presence on the national day, the Mercury reported that the Returned Services League had presented an Australia Day Achievement Award to the staff of the Hobart Repatriation Hospital. Here, a conservative body upholding the remnants of the imperial connection was gaining political capital out of Australia Day.

The diminishing British kinship connection was represented in the form of the Governor-General’s annual address to the Australia Day National Press Club lunch in Canberra. As if to spite the traditionally conservative, imperial stance of his position, the outgoing Queen’s representative, Sir Ninian Stephen, made front page headlines throughout the nation with a call for the abolition of State governments and a veiled criticism of the Opposition leader’s immigration policy. The Courier-Mail’s editorial praised Sir Ninian for his remarks, but noted that despite his comments about the prospect of a republican Australia, "Sir Ninian’s successors as the monarch’s man in Australia are likely to be around for some time yet to come". Pursuing the republican line, the executive director of Ausflag complained that the Bicentennial year had passed "without serious debate about the colonial flag which hangs around our future like a child clutching its mother’s skirts". He lamented the fact that Australians were "one year from our orgy of self-congratulatory, patriotic fervour, Australia Day, 1988, and we still don’t know who we are!" Australians had spent their birthday year "contemplating our navels and erecting signposts to our past".

34. Mercury, January 27, 1989, p.16.  
Most Australians chose to ignore his comments. They continued that theme by using history as a focus of their 1989 Australia Day celebrations. The restored Murray River paddle steamer, *Enterprise*, steamed around Lake Burley Griffin.38 Throughout the nation bush bands played the tune to revellers dressed in pioneer style at bush dances in their own attempts to construct an Australia Day nationalist tradition. The *Sydney Morning Herald* invoked the bush legend and explained the meaning of the term "cocky’s joy" to its readers,39 latching on to the interest in Australianiana. Australia Post capitalised on an interest in Australian history by releasing its 1989 Australia Day stamp, commemorating Sir Henry Parkes’ Federation Speech at Tenterfield almost 100 years earlier.40 In Hobart, 44 members of the First Fleet Fellowship dressed in replica first settlement clothing and marched through the city.41

Australia Day 1989 proved to be a fruitful site for fuelling Richard White’s theory that constructions of national identity reinforce the positions of the economically and politically powerful. It had abundant examples of commercial and political exploitation. But at the same time the fact that businesses and politicians saw potential gains in exploiting the day indicated that it had taken on some semblance of national appeal. A correspondent wrote to the *Australian*: "Australia Day won’t get off the ground until we start sending cards and exchanging gifts. Look at what the merchandisers have done for all the other ‘days’."42 She had not been reading her papers very closely. Most were littered with advertisements capitalising on the nation’s

39. *Sydney Morning Herald*, January 24, 1989, p.1. (Cocky’s joy is a sticky golden syrup used for damper.)
birthday theme. They ranged from Perth’s Bi-lo food chain’s Australia Day bargains through to the "Ultimate Holiday Specials at Sanctuary Cove Marine Village" on Queensland’s Gold Coast. Blackmores natural health care company cashed in on the healthy choice of the Australian of the Year, lone sailor Kay Cottee. Some companies chose to emphasise the historical nature of the day, drawing upon Australians’ sense of heritage for their sales. The ANA Friendly Society reminded Melbournians that the holiday was once called ANA Day - in an attempt to win their health insurance and investments. The Australian Bicentennial Authority tried to sell Australians the book Celebration, "the only official record of our Bicentenary" through advertisements in most capital city newspapers. Readers wondered why the Canberra Times and the Advertiser featured Australia Day in full-colour wrap-around supplements. This colorful burst of newly discovered patriotism was fully sponsored by The Winfield 25s Company with an advertisement on the back page featuring a sunrise over the ocean and the caption "...anyhow* Australia here’s to the next 200 years." But again, the fact that the cigarette company saw Australia Day as an advertising opportunity was one indication of the growing significance of the occasion.

For others there was political mileage to be gained from the national day. The Prime Minister, Mr Hawke, had a staff of press secretaries geared to capitalise on what had become a prime media event. There was the Prime Minister’s Australia Day message which defined national identity as "the sum of every Australian’s contribution" and called upon migrants to make a

commitment to their nation by becoming citizens. There were photo opportunities, with Mr Hawke pictured presenting Kay Cottey with her Australian of the Year Award and, donned with Akubra hat, chatting with an alderman at the Tamworth Country Music Festival. His call for a citizenship drive was accompanied by a letter to migrants and an advertisement in most capital city newspapers captioned "To be an Australian all you have to do is swear" - harking back to the brash rural image of the typical Australian in the radical nationalist mould. The campaign drew a hostile response from many correspondents with the Australian, whose criticisms included delays in having their applications processed, the cost of the citizenship privilege, and open rejection of the offer. A different political campaign urging Australians to purchase Australian-made products was launched by the Advance Australia Foundation. The Mercury supported the call in an editorial, saying it was "not just a matter of patriotism". It helped provide jobs and reduce the level of overseas debt. A writer to the Age demonstrated the extent of the problem:

I'm having 10 English visitors on Australia Day. I thought I'd give them a little kangaroo and koala holding an Australian flag. Both the toys are made in Korea, the flag in Thailand. Worst of all is that our Australian flag is flying upside down. Doesn't anyone care? Happy Australia Day.

The balance of payments headache was raised in another context - that of Japanese ownership of Australian property. The Australian's editorial writer rejected criticism of Japanese investment, writing,

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whether we like it or not, we need to persuade foreign investors to sink their money into Australia - be it into real estate or anything else. Whether honest money comes in from Tokyo or Timbuktu, should not matter. Ours is a free-enterprise society.\textsuperscript{54}

The cartoonist for the \textit{Courier-Mail} did not agree. He depicted a Japanese sailor saluting the flag in the Australia Day ceremony.\textsuperscript{55}

The Aboriginal issue - a dominant aspect of the Bicentennial celebrations the previous year - played a role in the Australia Day celebrations. The reporting of Aboriginal attitudes to the festivities varied from land rights demonstrations through to the launch of a rock album featuring black and white artists in a spirit of fostering relations.\textsuperscript{56} The demonstrators reminded Australians that Australia Day was celebrating the invasion of a country by whites and condoning massacres of Aborigines.\textsuperscript{57} A letter writer to the \textit{Australian} noted that Aborigines had been passed over in the Australia Day honours list.\textsuperscript{58}

Prime Minister Hawke was not the only politician to use Australia Day as a vote-catcher. His Minister for Employment, Education and Training, John Dawkins, used his annual Australia Day address to argue that a local consequence of the Hawke era would be more individual freedom. His speech was reported prominently in capital city newspapers. State Premiers posed for cameras and their staff packaged bite-size sentences for the media at Australia Day events throughout the nation. NSW Premier Greiner, as well as sparking the long weekend debate, used the occasion to designate 30,000 hectares of

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Australian}, January 27, 1989, p.8.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Advertiser}, January 27, 1989, p.8.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Australian}, January 31, 1989, p.2.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Australian}, February 3, 1989, p.8.
national park as an "Australia Day gift to the people". Two political storms broke out in Queensland over the Australia Day Honours lists. The Queensland Police Union complained that none of its officers had featured in the 1989 awards. The Premier, Mike Ahern, argued that it was not suitable to make such awards while the Fitzgerald report into corruption was still pending. Another Queenslander, ALP State political candidate Peter Beattie, complained that only 10 staff of Expo 88 had received awards.

The invented tradition of Australia Day and its associated rituals and ceremonies had developed to the extent that it was becoming significant to a wide cross-section of Australian society in a variety of ways. Through its diversity of expression at official and grass-roots levels, the national day had begun to resonate.