Australia Day and National Identity

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Chapter One:
Nation and Invented Tradition
Since this dissertation is concerned with Australia’s national day and Australians’ perceptions of national identity, it is important first to discuss the term "nation" and its derivatives: nationalism, national identity and national consciousness. This chapter also introduces the term "invented tradition" coined by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm.

During the twentieth century the nation and the individual’s sense of nationality have been inextricably intertwined. The nation has been seen as the composite of millions of individuals whose actions and characters it reflects. Despite their different colours and names on the world map, nations are not geographic facts - they are forms of collective imagining. A nation "is an imagined political community ... imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign".1 Consciously or subconsciously, citizens’ feelings about their nationality constitute a significant part of their psychological makeup and can influence their behaviour and attitudes. To that end, many community activities and attitudes have been developed this century to tap, capitalise upon and perpetuate the glorification of nation. Although they are quite recent developments when considered in the larger time-frame of modern history, such activities and attitudes are often constructed to give the impression that they are time-honoured traditions. This thread between national identity, individual identity and invented traditions is the subject of this chapter and forms the theoretical foundation of this dissertation.

Raymond Williams2 has explained the etymology of the word "nation" and its derivatives. He dates the use of the word in English from the late 13th century. Originally the word had the primary sense of a racial group rather

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than a politically organised grouping, but from the early 17th century the word nation was used to mean the whole people of a country, often in contrast to some group within it. (For example, a politician might argue that a trade union's industrial action is not in the interests of the nation as a whole.) From the 17th century the word "national" was used in this politically persuasive sense. According to Williams, only in the late 18th century did the word "nationality" acquire its modern political meaning. The words "nationalist" and "nationalism" became popular only from the mid-19th century. In his book Nationalism, Elie Kedourie designates nationalism as a 19th century concept and invention.\(^3\) The dating of the usage is important to this study because it is clear that the formation of the political concept of nation and nationality coincided with the white settlement of Australia and with the beginning of this country's debate over nationhood.

Twentieth century politicians have used derivatives of the word nation with marked success. Political parties have used it as part of their names. For example, Hitler's Nazi Party and Australia's National Party have both, in different ways, gained political mileage out of the "national" tag while espousing quite sectionalist or exclusivist membership and policies. Alan O'Shea traces British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's political use of the expressions "nation" and "national interest", arguing that Thatcher "broadened economic problems about public spending into questions of national pride and morality".\(^4\) Andrew Milner goes so far as to say that nationalism "the world

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over has become the characteristically modern type of political legitimation; the almost universal resort of actual or potential ruling classes, political elites and attendant intelligentsias".5

Clearly we need to distinguish between "nationalism" and "national identity" or "national consciousness" and to clarify the function of "invented tradition". Nationalism can be seen as an explicit, a more or less consciously held, doctrine, and as a movement. Seton-Watson argued that it was "something more than patriotism, or the mere feeling of solidarity within one group of people in regard to other groups".6 He wrote that it was also "something more than a selfish or aggressive attitude on the part of the government of one country in relation to other countries";

The doctrine declares that the interests of the nation, as interpreted by its spokesmen, come before all other interests within the state, before the interests of all other communities beyond its borders, and in the case of extreme totalitarian nationalisms, before all considerations of morality or religion. Nationalist movements aim to realise the interests of the nation at the expense of its enemies. Nationalism is by its very essence dynamic not static, it is an explosive force not a factor of stability.7

He proceeded to distinguish between nationalism and "national consciousness" - an expression this thesis uses interchangeably with "national identity";

The formation of national consciousness does not necessarily lead to nationalism. A nation which has become conscious of itself, whose members are united within the same country, independent of foreign rule, does not need to be nationalist, to formulate nationalist doctrines or create nationalistic movements... although you can have a nation without nationalism, you cannot have nationalism without national consciousness.8

7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p.6.
Nationalism can be seen as a political ideology committed to the development and manipulation of national consciousness (or identity) in its constituency. To succeed, nationalism must strike a chord of national consciousness (or national identity) and use this chord as a base for manipulation and exploitation. Glenn Bowman succinctly expresses the difference in an article on Palestinian identity:

National identity ... is a fairly diffuse recognition of various forms of cultural continuity shared by certain individuals and not shared by others; it can be asserted, and mobilised, in a number of different ways. Nationalism, on the other hand, is a particular assertion of national identity which mobilises, organises and transforms a sense of shared identity into a political program designed to realise, territorially and politically, the idea of community which underlies it.9

Bowman's description of national identity as "fairly diffuse" recalls the reluctance of other commentators to rigidly define the term. Erik Erikson10 chooses not to define identity closely in any of the many levels of meaning he explores, electing rather to let its meaning evolve in the context of the body of his writing. Erikson sees identity as

a process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture ... [it] depends on the support which the young individual receives from the collective sense of identity characterizing the social groups significant to him: his class, his nation, his culture ...11

In short, while national identity is a precondition for the development of nationalism, it does not necessarily develop into nationalism.

Smith traces nationalism in the 20th century to the development of a "national ideal". He claims that no other vision has set its stamp so thoroughly on the map of the world and on our sense of identity, writing that "We are identified first and foremost with our 'nation'. Our lives are regulated, for the most part, by the national state in which we are born."\(^{12}\) Smith traces the first clear statement of a national ideal to the French revolution, where "we read that the only sovereign is the nation, that man's first loyalty is to the nation, and that the nation alone can make laws for its citizens".\(^{13}\)

Some theorists such as Erik Erikson apply psychological theory to the historical development of nations. Writers such as Erikson, A.D.S. Smith and Miriam Dixson argue that the development of a nation's identity is comparable with a human being's in that it is largely influenced by early or "formative" experiences.\(^{14}\) Dixson uses this argument in her exploration of the role of women in Australian society and proposes that twentieth century gender relationships can be traced to attitudes among the eighteenth and early nineteenth century "casual poor" in Britain and Ireland, and their later experience as convicts.

Individuals define their own identities by using both comparisons and contrasts with other people. They look for others with similar and dissimilar characteristics in forming their own identities. Similarly, a construction of national identity can be an amalgam of negatives, as well as positives. Group identity can often be defined by what a community is not, as well as what it is. Cohen recognises this two-part process in identity formation by stressing that members of a particular community (such as a nation) feel they have

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13. *ibid*.
something in common with each other which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other comparable communities. In his anthropological study Nations Before Nationalism, John A. Armstrong notes that groups tend to define themselves not by reference to their own characteristics but by exclusion - that is, in contrast to strangers. Nineteenth century Canadians, for example, are reputed to have coined the phrase "We're Buggered if we're British, and we're Damned if we're Yanks" to evoke their concern about a national identity allegedly steeped in contradiction and complexity. In Australia, the adjective "un-Australian" has been used as an unanswerable reproach to describe behaviour, particularly in the sporting arena, which does not befit the castigator's own ideals of the national type.

In his "Notes on Nationalism" George Orwell questions the very existence of nations and expresses concern at the political exploitation of concepts of nation:

Jewry, Islam, Christendom, the Proletariat, and the White Race are all of them the objects of passionate nationalistic feeling: but their existence can be seriously questioned, and there is no definition of any one of them that would be universally accepted.

Orwell attributes to nationalists the desire to reconstruct past events to fit neatly with the version of nationalism they are promoting.

This concern with reconstruction and "invention" - most recently expounded by the post-structuralists - is addressed by Eric Hobsbawm in The Invention of Tradition, where he writes that traditions "which appear or claim

18. ibid., p.363.
to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented". The book uses as examples the invention of the Highland tradition of Scotland, the Welsh past in the romantic period, the rituals currently associated with the British monarchy, the representation of authority in Victorian India, the invention of tradition in colonial Africa and the mass-production of traditions in Europe 1870-1914. Hobsbawm defines "invented tradition" as

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.

Hobsbawm's "invented tradition" includes not only traditions actually invented, constructed and formally instituted, but also those rapidly emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief period. Although there have been examples of invented tradition throughout history, they have been more prevalent during the past 200 years, partly because of the perceived need to create national or imperial consciousness among populations at large. Significantly, the period of prevalence of invented traditions covers the span of modern Australian history. Hobsbawm argues that modern societies adapted old traditions to new conditions and used old models for new purposes. Existing customary traditional practices such as folksong, physical contests and marksmanship were "modified, ritualized and institutionalised for the new national purposes". A powerful ritual complex formed including festival pavilions, structures for the display of flags, temples for offerings,

20. ibid.
21. ibid.
22. ibid., p.6.
processions, bell-ringing, tableaux, gun-salutes, government delegations in
honour of festivals, dinners, toasts and oratory. Such rituals and traditions
have been related to concepts of nationhood by several commentators.
Raymond Firth\textsuperscript{23} has explored the relationship between flags and national
identity, Kaja Silverman\textsuperscript{24} has looked at how the Statue of Liberty has
invoked feelings of national consciousness in the United States, while Ken
Inglis\textsuperscript{25} has studied war memorials as one form of invented tradition.
Hobsbawm writes:

It is clear that plenty of political institutions, ideological movements and
groups - not least in nationalism - were so unprecedented that even historic
continuity had to be invented ... It is also clear that entirely new symbols
and devices came into existence as part of national movements and states,
such as the national anthem (of which the British in 1740 seems to be the
earliest), the national flag (still largely a variation on the French
revolutionary tricolour, evolved 1790-4), or the personification of 'the
nation' in symbol or image.\textsuperscript{26}

He argues that new traditions have not filled more than a small part of the
cultural space left by the long-term decline of old tradition and old custom -
"as might indeed be expected in societies in which the past becomes
increasingly less relevant as a model or precedent for most forms of human
behaviour".\textsuperscript{27}

Australia Day can be seen in the context of the invention of tradition. For
us, Hobsbawm's work raises several questions about the ceremonies of
Australia's national day. Can traditions be identified in the ceremonies or
rituals enacted on or associated with national day? If so, are they invented

\textsuperscript{24} Kaja Silverman, "Liberty, Maternity, Commodification", \textit{New Formations}, no.5, Summer 1988, pp.69-89.
\textsuperscript{25} Ken Inglis, "Men, Women and War Memorials: Anzac Australia", \textit{Daedalus}, vol.116, no.4, Fall 1987, pp.35-59.
\textsuperscript{26} Eric Hobsbawm, \textit{op.cit.}, p.7.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{ibid.}, p.11.
traditions? Who invented them, and for what purpose? How have such traditions contributed to or detracted from the public acceptance of the day as a national day? These questions will be addressed in Chapters 5-8 as part of the analysis of newspaper coverage of Australia Day.

Hobsbawm also concerns himself with the relationship between invented tradition and the nation, a relationship central to this study. He proposes that most of the occasions when people become conscious of their membership of a nation remain associated with distinctive symbols and semi-ritual practices. Most of these are historically novel and largely invented, such as flags, images, ceremonies and music.28 Historians, he proposes, need to be interested in invented traditions because in themselves they are evidence and "indicators of problems which might not otherwise be recognised". Invented traditions use history as a legitimator of action and cement group cohesion and "... are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the 'nation'".29

Hobsbawm raises an issue vital to the argument of this dissertation. Although many modern traditions such as national days are invented, their success, he proposes, is ultimately dependent on whether they are accepted by the public; whether they have been broadcast

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30. *ibid*, pp.263-4, (*my emphasis*).
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The question of the existence, or lack of, a "genuine popular resonance" is an important one. In the next chapter we will look at an influential recent thesis discounting such "resonance" and arguing that images of Australia have been largely manipulated. While "genuine popular resonance" is a key part of Hobsbawm's argument, he also insists on the role of manipulation by power groups. Though invented traditions would not exist unless they fulfilled significant social and political functions, it is hard to tell how far such traditions are open to manipulation:

conspiracy theorists opposed to such manipulation have not only plausibility but evidence on their side. Yet it also seems clear that the most successful examples of manipulation are those which exploit practices which clearly meet a felt - not necessarily a clearly understood - need among particular bodies of people... It has been suggested that to some extent nationalism escaped from the control of those who found it advantageous to manipulate it.31

A good example of a failed attempt at manipulation is what Harold Perkin calls "the battle for the hearts and minds" in nineteenth century England when the middle classes attempted to assert their moral and actual hegemony and to mould other sectors of society in their own image. Their success was anything but complete.32 Further, tastes and fashions have to be "discovered" before they can be shaped and exploited.

Anthony Cohen puts it a different way in his exploration of the symbolic construction of community. He identifies three models for the formation of people's consciousness about their community. The first is Durkheim's theory that such meaning is imposed on individuals as a body of social fact derived from social structures. The second is the Marxist idea that meaning is part of a

31. ibid, p.307.
superstructure derived from an economic base. Cohen discounts both of these, preferring Geertz's anthropological theory that culture ("webs of significance") is "created and continually recreated by people through their social interaction, rather than imposed upon them as a Durkheimian body of social fact or as Marxist superstructure". He continues:

Behaviour does not 'contain' meaning intrinsically; rather, it is found to be meaningful by an act of interpretation: we 'make sense' of what we observe. The sense we make is 'ours', and may or may not coincide with that intended by those whose behaviour it was.33

In their study of the invention of Englishness, Colls and Dodd support Hobsbawm in pursuing a critical balance between "resonance" and "manipulation/exploitation" when writing about national identity.34 Dodd rejects the argument that we should see national identity purely in terms of something forced on the politically powerless by the politically powerful. The remaking of English class, gender and national identity was undertaken at such a variety of social locations and by so many groups that it is difficult to talk of a common intention - "Not any identity can be imposed ... it must at least be consented to."35 The degree to which Australians have "consented" to various constructions of their national identity on Australia Day will be considered in the ensuing chapters.