AUSTRALIA CELEBRATES

An exploration of Australia Day festivals and national identity

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**Introduction**

Tourists receive messages from the various sites they visit, sent to them by the creators of those sites. These places, presented as aspects of a national heritage, help to shape a common national identity or ‘imagined community’ amongst a diverse population. This shared identity is often an official goal of countries comprised of many different cultures where there exists a common urge to create a national identity to overcome diversity and difference within the nation-state (Pretes 2003). If sites can help create a common identity or imagined community among a diverse population, can a series of events held on a country’s national day represent aspects of the nation’s culture and help to develop a common national identity?

This chapter explores how Australians celebrated Australia Day historically and in 2017 and considers these festivals and events in the context of national identity development and Australian nationalism. Australia Day, held on 26 January, is Australia’s national day, commemorating the day in 1788 when European settlers first arrived in Botany Bay. Throughout the country, many federal, state, territory and local council-supported events are staged to celebrate Australia as a country and to celebrate being Australian. The Australia Day festival celebrations range from formal occasions supported by government funding such as citizenship ceremonies, to independent informal gatherings of friends and neighbours holding Australia Day barbeques and idiosyncratic and irreverent events and activities. The celebration of Australia Day on 26 January has become a topic of controversy in recent times, with some municipalities (including Melbourne’s City of Yarra and City of Darebin) voting to cancel Australia Day festivities altogether from 2018. Indeed, Councillors at the City of Yarra unanimously voted to no longer refer to 26 January as Australia Day (Australian Associated Press 2017).

Such diverse celebratory events taken together can be viewed as a festival reflecting Falassi’s belief that a festival can be based on ‘power, class structure, and social roles’ and can be staged ‘by the people for the people’ or ‘by the establishment for the people’ (Falassi 1987, p. 3). In addition, Falassi notes at festival times, people engage in activities they do not normally engage in, and they ‘invert patterns of daily social life’ (1987, p. 3), which reflects the many unusual and quirky events staged on Australia Day, as discussed later. From a festival typology perspective, the Australia Day festival reflects many of the rites or ‘movements’ that
occur during the festival from the beginning to end, namely the rites of purification, passage, reversal, conspicuous display, conspicuous consumption, drama, exchange, competition and devalorisation (Falassi 1987). Getz (2010, p. 7) notes that festivals are cultural celebrations and they ‘always have a theme and they have potentially very diverse programs and styles, all in pursuit of fostering a special kind of experience’. He explains that festivals are ‘connected to cultures and to places, giving each identity and helping to bind people to their communities’ and can ‘foster and reinforce group identity’ (Getz 2010, p. 8). By examining some of the themes, rites and rituals surrounding national celebrations such as Australia Day, we can perhaps rethink our understanding and awareness of national heritage and tradition ‘in our everyday lives’ (Waterton 2010, p. 206).

**Nationalism and national identity in Australia**

An exploration of the concepts of nation and nation-state and some consideration of the arguments surrounding the debate on these terms provides a useful basis from which to examine theories of national identity and nationalism, particularly with reference to how nationalism is celebrated in Australia. There is no question that the nation has a significantly broader meaning than the geographical boundaries of a country. The term encompasses more far-reaching notions than territory alone. It is acknowledged that the nation can embrace a combination of political, social, cultural, historical, economic, linguistic and religious factors (Anderson 1983). When an individual is said to belong to a nation, it is generally understood that the person has their foundations in that country. The word nation originated from the Latin term ‘natio’ or community of birth. Nation is therefore associated with words such as native, nature, innate, natal and renascent.

While numerous theorists have analysed nationalism, Benedict Anderson’s ground-breaking 1983 work (revised a few times since) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* has reconceptualised the way scholars have come to think about nationalism. Anderson popularly conceptualised the nation as an ‘imagined political community’. Of the academic literature produced on theories of nationalism over the past 30 or so years, Anderson is among the most frequently cited (Culler & Cheah 2003, p. vii). Ozkirimli argues that Anderson’s work ‘constitutes one of the most original accounts of nationalism to date’ (Ozkirimli 2000, p. 151), while James claims that Anderson’s key text ‘remains the most insightful book written in the area’ (James 1996, p. ix). According to Anderson, nationalism is a taken-for-granted frame of reference (1991, p. 12). It is the daily ritual, undertaken by individuals of the nation separately, of reading about the events that have been selected as newsworthy that cement the concept of a common national identity. Billig refers to the way in which symbols of the nation are reproduced daily as ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 1995, p. 6). As Billig explains, banal nationalism (everyday nationalism) is evidenced not by the flag but by the flag that might be relatively unnoticed in a public space. For the individual celebrating national festivals and events such as the highlights of Australia’s Bicentennial celebrations in 1988 or the Opening Ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, heritage becomes somehow embodied and personified by their own experiences and those of others – along with the many photographs of the experiences that may be taken and shared. If we understand heritage as a process that constructs meaning about the past, then the construction of the related rituals and traditions is illustrative of this process. It is, essentially, a construction of national heritage based on stories, memories, reports and photographs that have been documented and passed down through the ages by family and friends.
Australia celebrates

In this chapter, we discuss three main types of nationalism – official, popular and commercial. Official nationalism is the civic, formal and ceremonial nationalism such as the Australian Government’s planning of the Bicentennial celebrations in 1988 or the Centenary of Federation celebrations in 2001 (Anderson 1983). National anthem, flag and official symbols are part of official nationalism. The concept of popular nationalism was examined by Ward (1966) and can include nationalist messages and images as depicted in popular culture texts such as Australian film, television drama, popular songs and sport. Mackay argues that ‘Our belief in a distinctive, homogenous set of Australian characteristics – an essential Australianness – is sustained by the rural myth’ (Mackay 1999, p. 44). Such rural myths are evidenced in texts such as the 1895 poem *The Man from Snowy River* and the numerous related texts that have been produced since that time, along with associated commercial industries. Consequently, the connected texts work to perpetuate the myth amongst Australian and overseas visitors in industries such as fashion and tourism (White 2009). Commercial nationalism refers to consumer-related uses of these national symbols, images and icons. It is the nationalism represented by companies and through products such as Qantas and Vegemite. Seal (2004) acknowledges official and unofficial factors in telling a nation’s story by stating in the preface of *Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology*, that his book ‘demonstrates how the official and the unofficial, the formal and the folkloric, the institutionalised and the communal have colluded – and continue to collude – in the construction of a potent national mythology’ (p. vii).

**Historic celebrations of Australia’s national day**

Australia Day was celebrated during previous major anniversaries of European settlement (1838, 1888, 1938 and 1988) with the various themes and representations of Australian history being modified over time at the 50th, 100th, 150th and 200th anniversaries. In examining the ways in which the act of European settlement had been marked in the past, it appears that specific events such as fireworks, regattas and re-enactments of the arrival of the First Fleet were part of the ritual which organisers thought it appropriate for the national birthday to be celebrated.

26 January, 1838 marked the passing of 50 years since the establishment of a penal colony at Sydney Cove at which the British flag was unfurled. The 1838 celebration was known as Anniversary Day, and loyalty was directed towards Great Britain. A public holiday was declared, and events such as a 50-gun salute, regatta, jubilee waltz and fireworks display took place. The national newspaper, *The Australian*, reflecting the attitude of the day, proudly reported that ‘instead of savages and beasts of the field, human beings now populate the land’ (Horne 1981, p. 16). Various reports of Aboriginal maltreatment by white settlers had reached Great Britain, and a report tabled in the House of Commons made recommendations for the protection of Australia’s original inhabitants.

The Centenary celebrations of 1888 had many similarities with the Bicentennial celebrations that would be held 100 years later. The Centennial festivities were mainly centred in and around Sydney, and the harbour regatta of 1888 was a forerunner to the Tall Ships and First Fleet parades of sail that were held in 1988. In 1888, an area known as the Lachlan Swamps was renamed Centennial Park and dedicated to the people of Sydney, while a site of 100 hectares in the geographical centre of metropolitan Sydney was named Bicentennial Park 100 years later. During the Centenary celebrations, a foundation stone for the New South Wales (NSW) Parliament building was uncovered, while in 1988, Australia’s first permanent Parliament House in Canberra was declared officially opened. Finally, the
Centennial International Exhibition held at Melbourne’s Exhibition Buildings was essentially the 19th-century equivalent of the World Expo held on the banks of the Brisbane River for the Bicentenary. However, the Centenary celebrations were not without their detractors. The widely read national journal, *The Bulletin*, described the celebrations as ‘childish, frothy and boastful’ – similar sentiments to those that were also to emerge 100 years later for the Bicentenary.

Australia’s Sesquicentenary celebrations in 1938 had two main features in common with the Bicentenary: organisers focussed on the nation, and the Aboriginal community expressed their opposition. Australia had changed significantly in the past 50 years, and two key dates which contributed to this change were the 1st of January 1901 and the 25th of April 1915. On the first day of the 20th century, the Commonwealth of Australia came into being and the proclamation of the Federal Constitution was celebrated at Sydney’s Centennial Park. In May of that year, Australia’s first Federal Parliament was formed, and four months later the flag, a crucial symbol for a new nation, was launched. Ironically Australia’s official birth as a nation took place in the same year that Queen Victoria died, having reigned for 63 years. While the political genesis of Australia can be traced to the events of 1901, some historians have argued that it was the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) landing at Gallipoli in 1915 that marked the emergence of Australia as a nation. The Aboriginal community declared 26 January, 1938 a ‘Day of Mourning and Protest’ and held a conference which attracted more than 100 supporters. However, unlike the Bicentenary when Aboriginal issues were given a reasonable amount of media coverage, this event was almost entirely ignored by the media. The national day only became known as ‘Australia Day’ in 1946 and was generally celebrated as a long weekend as the nearest Monday was taken as a public holiday.

Having provided an overview of some of the theories of nationalism and national identity, the way Australia Day has been celebrated historically was explored. The following provides an examination of the various ways in which the nation was celebrated on Australia Day in 2017. The meanings conveyed in the presentation of signifiers of nation and nationalism are investigated.

**Australia Day 2017**

On 26 January 2017, each state and territory is involved in the Australia Day festival by hosting a variety of events to celebrate Australia Day. Most of these events were staged outdoors, reflecting the summer weather across Australia which supports and encourages outdoor activities at that time of year. Many Australia Day festival events were held at iconic venues such as on and around Sydney Harbour, on rivers, and at local parks and beaches. An example of a traditional Australia Day event held in 2017 at an iconic venue was the 181st Australia Day Regatta, held on Sydney Harbour, with the Australia Day website stating,

> Enjoy the world’s oldest continuously conducted annual sailing event, now in its 181st edition, which will see scores of vessels – including vintage yachts and 18-foot skiffs – compete in events for all classes in the Eastern area of Sydney Harbour.

*(Australia Day Council of NSW 2017)*

As in previous iterations of Australia Day, the events held on Australia Day 2017 can be divided into Official events, Commercial Events and Popular Events. The Australia Day 2017 Official events involved activities such as flag raising, citizenship events and open houses of
government buildings. Some states or territory governments hosted events to announce the Australian of the Year and stage award ceremonies. There was also a Welcome to Country and Indigenous dancing session. For example, in the town of Singleton in NSW, an Australia Day Ceremony was held in the Civic Centre and featured a citizenship ceremony, the announcement of the local Citizen of the Year and the town’s Young Achiever of the Year, with the Australia Day address delivered by a special guest appearance of a TV personality.

In Toowoomba, Queensland, an official flag-raising ceremony held at 8.30 am was followed by some Australian damper, lamingtons and cups of tea. Damper is a traditional Australian bread, eaten by swagmen, drovers and stockmen in the 1800s, while lamingtons are chocolate and coconut cubes of sponge cake that are reported to have been named after Baron Lamington, the first governor of Queensland from 1895 to 1901 (Symons 2007).

In Newcastle, the day started at 9 am with a traditional Australia Day citizenship ceremony, where 100 people became new citizens, and there were also awards for the City of Newcastle Citizen, Young Citizen and Community Group of the Year. The Northern Territory staged their 2017 Australian of the Year Awards during an Australia Day Black Tie Ball and was the only Official Event in the sample held in the evening, possibly reflecting that January in Darwin is during the Northern Territory’s wet season and so an inside event is more suitable. An example of a Popular Event was ‘Australia Day 2017 – Live at the Sydney Opera House’ which was a concert staged at the Sydney Opera House featuring many of Australia’s best musicians performing in front of a capacity crowd. The concert was also broadcast live on television and was organised by the NSW Government through its tourism and major events agency Destination NSW. These ceremonial events staged as part of the Australia Day festival reflect Falassi’s rites of conspicuous display whereby the ‘ruling groups typically display themselves as guardians and keepers, and as depositories of religious or secular power, authority, and military might’ (Falassi 1987, p. 4).

**Family activities**

The attendees at the 2017 Australia Day festival were either passive or active participants, with the passive audience members simply watching the events as they unfolded in front of them and the active participants being physically involved in some capacity during the event. There were many examples of events staged for fun and engagement by families which encouraged active participation. Many of these events encouraged families to visit a variety of outdoor settings such as local parks to take part in a range of activities for the children. The most frequently organised children’s activities included activities such as jumping castles, face painting, petting zoos, balloon twisting, family trivia quizzes, pony rides, colouring competitions, roving entertainment and give-aways. These activities were held throughout the day, from early in the morning until late at night, often culminating in fireworks displays. These were described as fun and interactive, designed to entertain the whole family.

There were also some Australian-themed activities which strongly reflected aspects of Australia’s history, geography, economy and culture. In rural and regional areas there was a reflection of the country in activities such as blacksmithing, cow milking, whip cracking, sheep shearing and sheep dog demonstrations reflecting Australia’s strong agricultural background. There were also ute musters and motorbike displays. Utility vehicles or pickups (referred to as the ute) are seen across the length and breadth of Australia as they are a key tool for rural farmers and urban tradesmen. The first ute was launched in 1951 and remains a symbol of Australia’s supposed egalitarianism to this day. The ute is celebrated in regional parts of Australia with ‘ute musters’ whereby owners converge to celebrate the different styles
and forms of ute. At Bella Vista Farm, an hour’s drive inland from Sydney, the Australia Day web page noted that ‘convict floggings are set to run throughout the day’ (National Australia Day Council 2017a). There were several examples of thong (flip-flop) throwing competitions reflecting the ubiquitous Australian practice and tradition of wearing thongs in informal settings whereby the thong is an Aussie icon and is considered the essential footwear item of summer. The humble thong has been an essential part of beach culture in Australia since the 1950s. There were examples of native animal and reptile displays reflecting Australia’s unique fauna. For example, the Maitland City Council organised the following Australian-themed activities: a backyard sprinkler playground, a cubby house corner, backyard cricket and yard games and a lawn mower obstacle course for children. The lawn mower is a particularly iconic item which was also featured at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. The town of Mindarie in Western Australia had Australian-themed events staged all day:

Keep the kids entertained from 11 am – 4 pm at the giant sandpit with free activities including a jumping castle, surf simulator, temporary tattoos, the big dig, Vegemite finger painting and a bubble zone… Then finish the evening with a choc-top and popcorn while watching the classic Aussie movie Crocodile Dundee on the silver screen.

(National Australia Day Council 2017b)

Such events reflect the mostly informal events staged as part of Australia with only a couple of examples of formal events such as the Northern Territory government hosting a black tie dinner. The variety of events reflects Falassi’s rites of exchange and reinforces the idea that attendees at festivals engage in activities they would not normally engage in and they invert patterns of daily social life.

**Music and food**

The use of music was evidenced throughout Australia as part of Australia Day festival events in 2017 and involved local bands performing in local parks. Some local councils had organised for cover bands to play who specialised in imitating traditional Australian bands such as The Australian INXS show and the Australian Divinyls show. Some events engaged DJs to play ‘Aussie Anthems all day’ or ‘spinning the decks with all your top Aussie hits from the 1970s’ (Central Coast Tourism 2017). Some destinations also allowed coverage of youth Radio Station Triple J to broadcast the Hottest 100 Countdown, which has been running since the late 1980s. Since music is a great unifier and can encourage nostalgia (Barrett et al. 2010), these activities appeared to reinforce Australian nationalism.

On Australia Day 2017 there were many examples of the use of food, and Australian culture was reflected in the provision of various types of food which highlighted aspects of Australian food culture and often showcased the region. Some commercial operators promoted their Australia Day lunches or dinners, where people could choose from Australian-themed food, which included ‘Aussie-inspired tucker’ such as barbecued chicken, lamb and prawns, with desserts including pavlova with fresh fruit and cream and fairy floss. Local councils staged barbecues in local parks and offered ‘sausage sangas, shrimps on the BBQ’ and a variety of food stalls. In addition, there were more informal and humorous uses of food on Australia Day, including such activities as lamington-making, watermelon-eating and pie-eating competitions. Falassi (1987, p. 4) notes that rites of conspicuous consumption ‘usually involve food and drink’ and that rites of competition include ‘various forms of contest and prize giving’. During the Australia Day festival, there are many examples of Australians...
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consuming food and drink that are representative of Australian culture. Some of the eating competitions reflect Falassi’s suggestion that the rite of conspicuous consumption is often abundant, excessive or wasteful.

On the official Australia Day website there was encouragement for Australians to choose whatever an individual wanted to do to celebrate Australia Day, with the suggestion that whatever activity anyone chose to celebrate the day was acceptable. This may reflect the diverse nature of the population of Australia from multiple countries and across diverse cultures. The slogan ‘Celebrate #AustraliaDay Your Way’ reinforced the individual and varied nature of celebrating Australia Day. A series of associated videos were provided featuring well-known Australians discussing what Australia Day meant to them and how they have celebrated it.

Discussion

The Australia Day 2017 events ranged from the serious to the frivolous and the formal to the informal. The event organisers ranged from local councils and tourism boards, to voluntary non-profit organisations and private-sector companies. They ranged from barbecues and games to sporting activities, and there were federally sponsored events, state-sponsored events and locally supported events. The variety and type of events taking place on Australia Day may reflect Spillman’s (1997) suggestion that, in a diverse country, diversity itself becomes an aspect of national identity. Some events were organised by commercial operators aiming to make money. However, most events were free, sponsored by the state or territory government or local council.

Some Australia Day events were held at locations that had no obvious link to the event being held, so, in effect, the event could be held on any site, as the location is incidental to the core activity of the event. Robinson, Picard and Long (2004, p. 187) suggest that ‘generic and socially decontextualised – placeless – festival forms are increasingly being invented and scheduled with a main purpose of attracting tourist audiences as well as catering for various types of communities’. The Australia Day festival events were not designed to attract tourists, but rather citizens; nonetheless, the events have a strong association with the location, reflecting the culture and identity of the area. For example, the Best Pioneer Costume competition held in Gympie, Queensland reflects the pioneering element of the early white settlers to the region. Physical participation in the event through competition is offered at Australia Day festival events, with the opportunity provided for the attendee to experience and participate in the core activity of the event. The participants in the Australia Day events did not require a range of specialist skills, knowledge or expertise to fully engage in the core activity of the event. Effectively, the events were open to all types of people, perhaps reflecting Australian egalitarianism.

Many Australia Day events are not serious but simply provide an opportunity for participants and spectators to have fun and enjoyment. Weed (2006, p. 306) notes that sport, ‘while still pursued by some for traditional motives of fitness, health, competition and achievement, is now increasingly participated in simply for fun and pleasure’. Similarly, Frew (2006) notes that when tourists experience fun at humorous events and festivals it helps ensure the experience is a positive one for all involved namely, the tourist, the tourism employees and the locals. She suggests that the generation of pleasant emotions when attending a humorous event may result in high satisfaction levels and positive word-of-mouth recommendation about the experience and/or destination. Therefore, the provision of fun and light-hearted activities such as Australia Day events may have numerous tourism-related benefits and may reflect the Australian satirical sense of humour.
Conclusion

This chapter has considered the variety of events organised when Australians celebrate their national day and discusses what this tells us about who Australians are and how they view themselves as a nation. Horne noted that national identity entails more than simply ‘flapping flags, singing folk songs or telling heroic anecdotes’ (1981, p. 62). Indeed, this chapter has noted that the Australia Day festival includes many ways to celebrate nationalism, from mainstream events funded by the government to self-effacing, satirical and offbeat events such as backyard cricket, lamington-making, whip-cracking displays and pie-eating competitions.

The Australia Day festival celebrations in 2017 were similar in many ways to the Australian Centenary of Federation celebrations in 2001 when it was reported that ‘Australia yesterday managed to pull off a medley of the sentimental, the commemorative and the down-right bizarre’ (Hurrell 2001, p. 4). The staging of such ‘down-right bizarre’ events on Australia Day is appropriate in a country that prides itself on not taking itself too seriously, where the off-beat events highlight and reinforce the non-conformist and irreverent mocking nature, with a clear preference for the irreverent, the unauthorised, and the sometimes uncouth. While Australia Day committees across the country can work to encourage patriotic flag-raising and citizenship ceremonies, the many events staged on a limited budget provide an attractive lure for Australians.

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which Australia Day remains an important part of the Australian national consciousness. Official, popular and commercial celebrations of Australia Day tell us much about who we are as a nation. The commemoration of this important national day at the local, state and national levels and adopting official, popular and commercial styles of nationalism appears to be gaining in momentum and shows little signs of slowing down. The chapter also used Falassi’s theory of rites or ‘movements’ at festivals to demonstrate that Australia Day events reflect many of these aspects.

As Australians, we learn much about our contemporary social and cultural environment when we take the time to explore the diverse ways in which Australia Day is celebrated. Examining a variety of manifestations of the Australia Day festival celebrations in 2017 can assist us in moving closer to answering some of the deeper questions about the ubiquitous and endearing characteristic that we know as the Australian national identity. The highly ironic and irreverent events staged reflect that Australians do not have a problem with mocking themselves or the quirky items that form a unique part of their culture and the diversity of the events reflect the diversity of the culture of Australians from many parts of the world.

Further research might attempt to explore why some celebrations and legacies of Australia Day continue to generate such distinct and unique meanings. Some official, popular and commercial Australia Day festival celebrations and imagery swim to the top, while others sink to the bottom and do not develop currency. An area worthy of further examination would be to determine the nature and intensity of the more persistent and regular types of Australia Day events. The movement of local councils banning Australia Day celebrations from their local area in recognition of the negative connotations of day for Indigenous Australians makes this an issue to follow with interest in the future.

References


Australia celebrates


