

# An ‘outside-in’ PR history: Identifying the role of PR in history, culture and sociology

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Historical, social and cultural understanding of public relations in Australia is limited because most histories of PR examine practices specifically labelled ‘public relations’ and almost all study PR from ‘inside out’ – that is, from the subjective perspective of PR practitioners. This article reports an alternative approach to PR history which applies historical analysis of major events, icons, and institutions in society to identify the methods of their construction politically, culturally and discursively. This article specifically reports historical and critical analysis of the creation and celebration of Australia’s national day, *Australia Day* from soon after the British flag was hoisted in Sydney on 26 January 1788 to the sophisticated pageantry of the nation’s bicentenary in 1988 and its entry to the new millennium in 2000. This research challenges a ‘blind spot’ in social science and humanities disciplines in relation to public relations by showing that the practices of PR are deeply embedded in the social and cultural construction of societies. This study confirms Taylor and Kent’s claim that “all nation building campaigns include large communication components that are essentially public relations campaigns”.

## Introduction

Falling on 26 January, Australia Day is Australia’s national day. It marks the anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet at Sydney’s Port Jackson in 1788 and the first unfurling of the British flag on Australian soil. The public holiday provides an opportunity for many Australians to celebrate their nation and to participate in a range of celebrations. For others, it is an uncomfortable reminder of European colonisation and the suffering experienced by the nation’s indigenous inhabitants. And for a significantly smaller number of Australians, Australia Day marks the culmination of a protracted public relations campaign. Noting that “Australia is not a nation of spontaneous flag wavers – it is a nation of organised flag wavers”, Warren Pearson and Grant O’Neil contend that organisations such as the National Australia Day Council and its state branches provide “event and communication opportunities through which Australians can demonstrate their national identity and spirit” (2009, p. 86). Devoting months of work to each year’s official Australia Day programme, these councils’ PR teams and PR practices are integral to the day’s celebrations and the ongoing promotion of national identity. However, it would be inaccurate to see this PR only as a recent practice. As this paper demonstrates, PR has been integral to establishing 26 January as Australia’s national day and in the construction of Australian nationhood and identity over almost two centuries.

The creation and promotion of Australia Day has attracted relatively little historical attention. To date, Ken Inglis' (1967) historical account remains the most authoritative study. With the overall story mapped out, subsequent accounts have adopted a narrower focus. The Bicentenary celebrations in 1988, for example, attracted significant though fleeting attention with little being written on it since. The changing meanings ascribed to Australia Day and the public's apparent apathy towards it have also emerged as a common trope (White 1981; Elder 2007; Ward & Curran 2010). While these critical accounts certainly undermine Australia Day's credentials as the 'true' national day, their focus on such fissures has obfuscated the fundamental success of Australia Day – namely its very existence. Inglis' account consequently stands out for recognising the role performed by communicators in promoting Australia Day. His references to "public relations men" and their impact on Australia Day may be brief and dismissive (1967, pp. 31–35, 38), but they reflect Taylor and Kent's claim that "all nation building campaigns include large communication components that are essentially public relations campaigns" (2006, p. 347). As such, this study's re-consideration of the history of Australia Day is implicitly linked to the broader history of PR.

### **Limitations of current histories of PR**

The need for a more considered approach to PR history is reflected in the shortcomings of existing historiography. Accounts of the growth and influence of PR practices have been limited or undermined by four key shortcomings.

Firstly, many have an Americentric focus (Cutlip, 1994; Ewen, 1996; Marchand, 1998), prompting L'Etang (2008) to lament that "US scholars ... assume the activities referred to as PR have been invented by Americans and then exported elsewhere" (p. 328). While questions about this American focus on 20th century public relations have been raised in recent Australian scholarship (Heath, 2005; Macnamara & Crawford, 2010), the majority of Australian historical accounts uncritically conform to this US-derivative paradigm (Tymson & Sherman, 1987; Stanton & Phillips, 1998; Tymson, Lazar & Lazar, 2008). To this end, they commonly date the origins of PR in Australia to the activities of interwar Hollywood press agents and the General MacArthur's wartime public relations department (Zawawi, 2009, p. 44).

Secondly, PR histories have narrowly focused on activities explicitly defined as 'public relations' rather than the diverse public communication practices that characterise the field. As such, they omit significant events and activities from their analysis (Holtzhausen 2007).

Thirdly, the focus on pioneering individual practitioners, particularly the work of consultants (Sheehan 2007), and, to a lesser degree, private consultancies has overshadowed institutional and governmental communication initiatives. Such initiatives fundamentally inform ideas of nation, culture, and society, prompting L'Etang's call for a "much broader view" of PR history and PR in history (2008, p. 327). Jelen (2008) and Karlberg (1996) similarly advocate a broader perspective, noting that scholarship has long failed to identify and examine PR's wider social, political, and cultural implications.

Fourthly, attempts to construct histories of public relations are characterised by their propensity to be *about* public relations *for* public relations. Consequently, there is a need for a broader, more inclusive understanding of public relations that recognises temporal, geographic, and cultural variations in terminology and practice. Moreover, it needs to note

that the practice is also referred to as publicity, public information, public education, and other terms and euphemisms.

Outside the PR field, PR is often trivialised and marginalised. This has typically occurred in journalism and media studies, where PR is derogatively labelled ‘spin’ (Ewen, 1996; Louw, 2005) and its impact is underplayed or even denied. Paradoxically, while journalists complain about PR as an “obfuscation” of truth that they need to overcome (Jeffers, 1977), they consistently downplay or deny that PR influences media and shapes public discourse (Cunningham & Turner, 2010, p. 212; DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). Such dismissive accounts venture little beyond the ‘spin’ critique. Of course, some PR activities are indeed mere ‘spin’. However, the excessive focus on dubious ‘spin’ has skewed broader understandings of the PR industry and its practices. The outputs and effects of public relations have therefore gone unrecognised by researchers. Within the humanities and social sciences, references to Australian public relations practices or individuals are sporadic (Griffen-Foley, 2002, 2004; Hancock, 1999; Young, 2006). They fail to identify the outputs and effects of public relations in the broader social, political, and cultural context. White (1981) and Turner (1994), for example, highlight the impact of creative industries such as advertising, film, and television, yet fail to mention the use of PR in the construction of discourses of national identity. Current scholarly accounts ranging across media and cultural studies, journalism studies and communication studies, have also failed to bridge this gap. A significant blind spot consequently exists in Australian history, politics, media, and cultural studies.

In his survey of historical accounts of PR’s origins, Vos (2011) contends that “the difficulty in defining public relations has led to differences among historians in identifying the historical arrival of public relations as a social institution” (p. 121). Zawawi’s contention that public relations only arrived in Australia in the interwar years thus reflects her focus on self-identified publicity agents working in the commercial field. By focusing on public relations practices – namely publicity, events, media relations, lobbying, government relations, issues management – this paper seeks to deliver a less functionalist interpretation of PR’s origins in Australia.

While the PR activities surrounding Australia Day, particularly jubilee anniversaries, reiterate the view that PR has consistently borrowed from and built on past practices (Vos, 2011, p. 121), this process nevertheless provides a unique opportunity to chart the growth and development of PR practice. Moreover, this exploration of the relationship between Australia Day and public relations seeks to cast light on the blind spot in Australian history, politics, media, and cultural studies by demonstrating the ways in which public relations has been deeply embedded in the social and cultural construction of ideas of nationhood. In the process, it will demonstrate that public relations has performed an integral role in the way that Australia Day was established, popularised, and commemorated, and indeed in the way that Australian identity is conceptualised and celebrated today.

## **1818**

Formal and informal celebrations of Anniversary Day or First Landing Day had been organised in New South Wales since the colony’s earliest years – often to excess (Inglis, 1967, pp. 25–26; Inglis, 1974, p. 139). However, such celebrations only gained media attention in 1817, when the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* (SGNSWA) reported on Isaac Nichols’ party for some 40 ‘select’ guests (SGNSWA, 1 February 1817, p. 2). This focus on the colonial elite’s celebrations reflects the highly stratified nature of

colonial society, not to mention the newspaper's status as an authorised government publication. The report recorded that dinner was followed by "a number of loyal toasts ... and a number of festive songs" including Robert Jenkins' "appropriate verses ... sung ... to the tune of Rule Britannia". It concluded that "Hearing it highly spoken of, we have applied for and been complimented with a copy of the verses, which appear at the head of the next column". This decision to locate and then reproduce Jenkins' verses for broader consumption reflects a growing interest in the colony's foundation date. Moreover, it also marks the first time that the media had become actively involved in generating publicity for the anniversary.

Being the thirtieth anniversary of the First Fleet's landing, the celebrations planned for 1818 attracted additional attention. Governor Lachlan Macquarie used the *SGNSWA* to announce that "a Salute of 30 Guns ... be fired from the Battery on Dawes' Point" (*SGNSWA*, 24 January 1818, p. 1). More importantly, readers were informed that "Artificers and Labourers in the immediate Service of Government be exempted from Work ... and that each of them receive an extra Allowance of One Pound of Fresh Meat as a Donation from Government". Macquarie's words and actions went beyond publicity. The public holiday for the colony's lower classes signalled a desire for more inclusive celebrations, demonstrating an attempt to cultivate community relations. It also indicated that Macquarie was aware of the fact that the event would only receive public support if the public was given an opportunity to participate.

The democracy of Macquarie's edict was not reflected in the *SGNSWA*; its focus remained squarely on the Governor's celebrations (*SGNSWA*, 31 January 1818, p. 2). Its reports of subsequent years' festivities would follow the same pattern (*SGNSWA*, 3 February 1825, p. 3; *SGNSWA*, 27 January 1827, p. 2; *SGNSWA*, 27 January 1829, p. 2). Such coverage also reflected the scaled-back nature of official celebrations. While the firing of a salute from Dawes' Point would remain an ongoing feature, the public holiday (and additional government hand outs) disappeared. Having scaled back its investment in the event, the authorities evidently felt little need to deploy public relations initiatives to stimulate public interest in such activities.

## **1838**

The approaching 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary rekindled interest in Anniversary Day. The *SGNSWA* threw its weight behind the cause, calling for a public meeting to consider "the measures necessary ... for the celebration of the 50th Anniversary ... as a public festival" (*SGNSWA*, 6 January 1838, p. 2). However, only a dozen people attended. Undeterred, the *SGNSWA* continued to champion the cause. It called for a public holiday to be declared and for the appointment of "some half-dozen of the most leading men" as "the stewards to make the necessary arrangements" for the celebrations (*SGNSWA*, 13 January 1838, p. 2). Although a public holiday was eventually proclaimed, the colony's "most leading men" did not take up the cause. A ball would be staged, but the newspaper was resigned to the fact there would be "nothing in the shape of public rejoicing" (*SGNSWA*, 15 January 1838 p. 2).

The *Colonist* noted that this lacklustre build up was not necessarily a comment on the event itself but rather a reflection of the colony's depressed economy. "All thoughts are now given up of having anything like a Public Jubilee", it concluded (*Colonist*, 17 January 1838, p. 3). However, two days later, an advertisement appeared in the *Australian* announcing: "Persons disposed to promote the getting up of a Sailing Match ... to come off on ... the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Foundation of the Colony, are requested to call at the Office of the Harbour Master" (*Australian*, 19 January 1838, p. 3). This public event elicited a positive, if

somewhat relieved, response from newspapers, with the *SGNSWA* and the *Sydney Monitor* both noting that they were “glad” to see the public actively moving to celebrate the jubilee (*SGNSWA*, 18 January 1838, p. 2; *Sydney Monitor*, 24 January 1838, p. 2.)

Apprehensions about the public’s failure to embrace the anniversary proved to be misplaced. The *SGNSWA* thus reported that “Much apathy had been shewn [sic.] on the subject of forming any plan for the day’s amusements, but with the arrival of ... the Jubilee, all appearance of apathy vanished” (*SGNSWA*, 30 January 1838, p. 2). Official events seemed to be out of step with the public’s celebrations, prompting the *Colonist* to comment that the authorities could have made a better effort to reach out to the community (*Colonist*, 27 January 1838, p. 3). However, as “the only amusement for which provision had been made” in 1839, the Regatta proved to be the Day’s centrepiece (*Colonist*, 30 January 1839, p.2).

Over the following decades, the day’s programme was gradually extended. Cricket matches and horse races were staged whilst fetes and fairs offered less sporting alternatives. For the *Sydney Morning Herald*, this expanding programme symbolised the colony’s progress:

The Anniversary Regatta was ... one of the principal features of the day ... old residents will remember, it used to be almost the only centre of attraction ... but in these days of trams, trains, and steamers ... there are so many inducements offered to holiday-makers that it is hard to choose. Still the regatta had ... an irresistible charm for an immense number of persons (*SMH*, 27 January 1881, p. 3).

Such celebrations notwithstanding, the press’ advocacy for the celebrations remained subdued throughout these decades. Its coverage seldom ventured beyond a celebratory editorial on the day and the results of the day’s races with a relatively positive comment on spectator numbers on the following day. Nevertheless, the staging of these sporting and entertainment events, the granting of a public holiday, and accompanying publicity helped ensure that Anniversary Day remained an important date on the colony’s calendar.

## **1888**

As with the previous jubilee celebrations, the approach of the centenary reinvigorated excitement. The Centennial Celebration Commission was established in November 1887. Of the 11 members, only three were not serving politicians: James Barnet, the Colonial Architect; Edmund Fosbery, Inspector General of the NSW Police; and James R. Fairfax, the proprietor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*, 25 November 1887, p.8). Fairfax’s appointment indicated an implicit understanding of the importance of the media in generating publicity for the imminent celebrations, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* duly threw its weight behind the celebrations. Fairfax’s position demonstrated an early understanding of the way that planned engagement of the media – i.e. a form of public relations – can help set the media agenda. Regular updates on commission meetings consequently found their way into the newspaper. However, political infighting soon emerged with commission members from the Opposition benches resigning on account of “the proposed expenditure upon the centennial celebrations is not justifiable” (*SMH*, 3 December 1887, p.12). While the resignation letters were published, the newspaper made no comment on the issue or, indeed, the costs of the imminent celebrations. To this end, media relations, a specialist practice of public relations, was being successfully deployed.

Public events are yet another form of public relations activities that were organised and supported by the Centennial Celebration Commission. In size and scale they were an

enormous increase on previous efforts. Headlined by the dedication of Centennial Park, the five-day events programme included the opening of Centennial Exhibition, a grand ball for the colonies' governors as well as numerous sporting events, musical performances, and religious services. An estimated 300,000 people converged on the city and its shoreline, whilst a further 50,000 made their way to Centennial Park (*SMH*, 27 January 1888, p. 3). The events staged on 26 January received extensive coverage in all of the Australian colonies. Hobart's *Mercury* typified the media's support for its national status: "The proceedings ... will do more to cement the union of the Colonies than anything that has been done hitherto, because the very basis of the whole is the absolute oneness of the people" (*Mercury*, 26 January 1888, p. 2).

While media coverage of subsequent Anniversary Day celebrations waned, another key development that contributed to the eventual establishment of a single national Australia Day was the formation and campaigning of interest groups or lobby groups. One such group was the Australian Natives Association (ANA). Established in 1871, the ANA was a friendly society for Australian-born men. It was committed to federation of the Australian colonies, and as early as 1886 it had expressed "the desirableness of celebrating a national holiday" and suggested 26 January as the most appropriate date (*SMH*, 20 February 1886, p. 14).

During the 1890s the ANA actively campaigned for a federated Australia. Its centrepiece in Melbourne was its great fete, which featured entertainments and sporting competitions (*Argus*, 28 January 1895, p. 5). Other branches staged similar events, albeit on a smaller scale. While the dream of a united Australia would be finally realised in 1901, the ANA's push for 26 January to be proclaimed Commonwealth Day was less successful. The ANA consequently sought to increase its festivities in scope and size, incorporating exhibitions of Australian manufactured wares and processions of community groups into the programme. Its commitment to the date meant that Victorians popularly referred to 26 January as ANA Day.

In the interwar years, the ANA's campaign to establish 26 January as Australia's national day intensified. In 1919 Queensland branches successfully convinced the government to proclaim 26 January as a public holiday (*Courier*, 27 December 1920, p. 6). Buoyed by their success, the Queenslanders now called for Australia Day to be the date's official title. Lobbying the Prime Minister directly, the ANA's campaign was finally rewarded in 1935 when it was announced that Australia Day would be celebrated in unison across all states. However, its victory was not complete – the holiday would take place on the nearest Monday to 26 January.

In opposition to the ANA's campaign, various other stakeholders expressed concerns about commemoration of 26 January as a national day. Some were concerned about the proclamation of a public holiday per se; some contested the appropriateness of 26 January as a national day; and others opposed the celebration of Captain Phillip's landing in 1788. Such debates illustrate Australia Day's contested status.

For example, while the public enjoyed the day off work, the business sector felt aggrieved by the ensuing loss of trade. In 1892, the Victorian Employers Union rejected the ANA's request that the union promote the holiday among its members. *The Argus* reported:

[I]t was acknowledged that there was more to justify the recognition of Foundation Day than of many of the other public holidays ... It was agreed, however, that it did not come within the province of the executive to ask the employers to observe the 26<sup>th</sup> inst. as a public holiday (*Argus*, 14 January 1892, p. 5).

The Brisbane Traders Association similarly urged the Colonial Secretary to reconsider 26 January's status as it "proved a great hindrance to business" (*Courier*, 21 December 1893, p. 5). While business groups continued to campaign against the holiday into the twentieth century, the self-centred nature of their appeals registered little support among the public.

Where business objected to the holiday, others took aim at 26 January's national day status. For them, the establishment of a penal colony was an inauspicious event to commemorate. While some of these suggestions sought to displace 26 January altogether, others proved more complementary. Rather than celebrating Phillip's arrival, various groups identified Captain Cook as the 'true' national hero. In 1893 the *Brisbane Courier* reported an address by Queensland's Attorney-General to the ANA that put Cook's case forward:

The 26<sup>th</sup> January really celebrated nothing in the history of Australia of which they could be particularly proud ... it was generally unsuitable throughout Australia, owing chiefly to the heat ... He would suggest that the 1<sup>st</sup> of May be chosen as a more suitable date for the national celebration. That was the day on which Captain Cook really first landed on the shores of Australia (*Courier*, 27 January 1898, p. 6).

Cook's supporters briefly found an ally in the ANA. Despite its advocacy of 26 January, the ANA felt that Cook might evoke a more passionate response, and in 1911 it urged the NSW government to change dates (*SMH*, 24 March 1911, p. 7). However, the call found few supporters. The Australian Historical Society, the Pioneers Club, and a public meeting of women in Queanbeyan all protested on historical grounds, whilst the organisers of the Anniversary Regatta feared for their long-running event (*SMH*, 23 March 1911, p. 9; *SMH*, 15 May 1911, p. 7; *SMH*, 15 July 1911, p. 13; *SMH*, 5 May 1911, p. 6; *SMH*, 13 April 1911, p. 9). Faced with such an outcry, the Cook campaign was quietly shelved.

The most important challenge to the status of 26 January as Australia's national day would emerge on 25 April 1916, when Australians first commemorated Anzac Day. This commemoration of the soldiers' supreme sacrifice prompted an immediate call for Australia to reconsider its national day (*Advertiser*, 31 January 1916, p. 6). Calls for Anzac Day to replace 26 January as the national holiday would be periodically raised in the post-war years (*Mercury*, 16 April 1924, p. 9; *West Australian*, 7 November 1924, p. 9). However, the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia succeeded in securing a national public holiday for in 1927. While Anzac Day's rapid elevation to national day status stood in marked contrast to 26 January's shambolic progress, it also meant that it had ceased to compete against Australia Day – the two national dates could co-exist.

Indigenous Australians raised fundamental questions about 26 January. While they concurred that the date marked a significant national event, the meanings they ascribed to it were altogether different. However, their cause only found a greater audience when the issue was periodically recognised by non-Indigenous Australians. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* 1922 Foundation Day editorial thus mused: "The claim of "Australia for the Australians" is a fine slogan, but if we believed in that cry we should all get out and leave Australia to the Australians – to wit, the aborigines, who are the true Australians" (*SMH*, 26 January 1922, p. 6). Rather than addressing this awkward issue, it was generally easier to overlook it for the time being.

However, the jubilee anniversaries made it more difficult to ignore the Aboriginal presence. Confronted with the act of dispossession, organisers of the Centenary jubilee hoped to offer some sort of amends. The *Sydney Morning Herald* therefore explained:

[T]he celebration ... of the first 100 years of Australian civilisation has ... a pathetic meaning to the dark-skinned natives. The Aborigines Protection Board ... has initiated arrangements ... to give the aborigines a share in the commemoration festival ... they will receive relief ... in the supply of clothing to helpless or sick people, and ... others will be provided with a good meal, and a still more valued gift of a quarter of a pound of tobacco (*SMH*, 6 January 1888, p. 5).

In identifying British colonisation as an inevitable though humane act of progress, this progressive narrative, as well as the initiative supporting it, served a distinct public relations function in supporting 26 January. The progress motif would be a central element of the sesquicentennial celebrations in 1938.

## 1938

Where preparations for the Centenary celebrations had begun some three months before 26 January, those for Sesquicentenary in 1938 would commence two years earlier with the formation of “Australia’s 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations Council” (*SMH*, 26 March 1936, p. 10). Led by John Dunningham MLA, its members were largely politicians, bureaucrats, and eminent community figures. However, adman R. S. Maynard was one of the few media representatives on the Citizens Organising Committee, which supported the Council (*SMH*, 5 May 1936, p. 10). A more official presence would be established with creation of the Publicity Committee, chaired by newspaper editor and businessman Ernest Sommerlad. The public announcement that Asher Joel had been appointed to the position of ‘publicity officer’ in April 1937 similarly emphasised a commitment to cultivating cordial relations with the media and, indeed, the general public (*SMH*, 15 April 1937, p. 5).

From the very outset, the activities of the Publicity Committee extended beyond the generation of publicity in the press. Reporting to the Council in March 1937, the Publicity Committee outlined its changing communication strategies: “Local publicity has been ... confined to news items of interest and to broadcast talks through National Stations; but when the Coronation is over full attention will be paid to the press and other campaigns necessary to give effective publicity” (p. 5). It therefore opposed the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s ban on broadcasting politicians during election time, claiming that it prevented various Council members from disseminating news pertaining to the Sesquicentenary celebrations (*SMH*, 25 August 1937, p. 20).

Of course, such efforts counted for little if Australia Day did not attract public participation. The community therefore needed to be engaged. However, such engagement meant more than mere attendance; it also sought to persuade the community that 26 January was their national holiday, *however* they celebrated it. Australia’s 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations Council and its Publicity Committee consequently set about staging a larger programme. The excitement surrounding the celebrations was palpable in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the eve of the programme’s opening event:

The stage is almost set; the audience has begun to gather; a few days hence the curtain will rise ... This notable interlude in our history, of whose approach the average citizen probably has hitherto been only vaguely conscious ... now begins to appear in its true proportions. The least

historically minded can hardly fail to understand the significance of the days which we are about to celebrate (*SMH*, 18 January 1938, p.10).

Organisers also sought to include Indigenous Australians. However, opposition from local Aborigines meant that organisers would have to source their Aboriginal performers from further afield. Direct opposition would be expressed through the “Day of Mourning and Protest” to be staged around the corner from the key procession. Attracting almost a hundred people, the protest meeting passed a resolution condemning the mistreatment of Aborigines and calling for equal rights (Gammage & Spearritt, 1987, pp. 14–21, 29–45). While brief reports were published the next day, the majority of Australia Day’s stakeholders found it easier to ignore such issues and to enjoy the festivities. However, this would not be a viable option in the long-term.

In its final reports, the Council announced that 750,000 people had cheered the March of Nationhood procession, 300,000 had watched the Venetian Carnival, and 250,000 had attended the Empire Games. The multitude of other events staged during the three-month period attracted thousands more (Australia’s 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations Council 1938, p.10). Such statistics clearly demonstrated that the organisers had succeeded in reaching out to the community, prompting the Council’s to conclude that “These figures indicate the appreciation of the Celebrations from the public point of view” (p.10).

## **1988**

Preparations for the Bicentenary commenced in 1978 with decision to create an authority to take responsibility for guiding the celebrations. The question of who should chair the authority reveal PR’s ambiguous place. Asher Joel had been active in Australia Day celebrations since the Sesquicentenary and had also staged other large-scale public spectacles (including the Captain Cook Bicentennial celebrations in 1970). However, Joel’s advanced age meant that the front runner for the position was Harry M. Miller, “a high flier with a good track record as a theatrical producer and celebrity manager” who had successfully staged the Queen’s Silver Jubilee celebrations (O’Brien, 1991, pp. 26-7). However, the collapse of one of Miller’s ventures coupled with the allegations of fraudulent misappropriation meant the inaugural ABA chair would be John Reid, “a highly regarded member of the nation’s business establishment” with no experience in PR (O’Brien, 1991, p. 27). Reid’s replacements shared similar credentials.

The decade-long preparations demonstrated a desire to eclipse previous jubilee celebrations altogether. However, the extended lead up proved to be a hard slog. Government financial commitments generated intrigue and controversy whilst questions about the significance of the Bicentenary similarly ensured its newsworthiness for the media. Although the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA) had appointed a national information coordinator in 1980 and kept a public relations firm on a retainer, its shortcomings continually found their way into the press (O’Brien, 1991, pp. 288–290). Concerned that this negativity would undermine its increasing programme of events, the ABA established media relations as a central plank of its PR strategy.

The appointment of Wendy McCarthy as general manager of communications in 1985 marked a new phase in the ABA’s public relations strategy. In order to rectify the ABA’s tarnished reputation, McCarthy developed a more proactive relationship between the ABA and the media:

For a start, I insisted that the Communications view be an integral part of the planning of the Authority's affairs ... And I also insisted on a professional approach to the media. We spoke on the record or not at all. The Authority had to open its doors and be taught to be accountable to the media. ... I had to overcome entrenched attitudes toward media relations and I had to help cope with the public consequences of several years of things that had gone awry (O'Brien 1991, p. 293).

The states' Bicentennial councils had expressed similar concerns. The NSW Bicentennial Council consequently called for a "cheerful, down to earth image ... with which common folk could comfortably associate", as this image would "combat much media coverage which continued to cast the Bicentenary in a negative light" (Ashton, 1989, p. 107).

As the date neared, the media relations strategy appeared to be paying off. While concerns about the event's significance were still voiced, media attention was less fixated on the organisers' failures. Coverage increasingly highlighted the program and events scheduled for 26 January 1988. More importantly, public awareness in the Bicentenary had increased – thanks to the \$10 million national advertising campaign launched in mid-1987 (O'Brien, 1991, p. 125). The ABA's PR team also began to pay attention to other aspects of the imminent celebrations, such as the licensing of Bicentennial logos and the production of memorabilia (O'Brien, 1991, pp. 295–259).

Having achieved their principal aims, the Bicentenary organisations tailored their media relations initiatives to meet the public's needs. In its final months, the NSW Bicentennial Council's media relations campaign went from generating positive interest in the Bicentenary to providing specific details about the impending events and festivities (Ashton, 1989, pp.115–117). An estimated 2.5 million people thronged Sydney Harbour on 26 January (Hawley, 1988, p.1) with equally impressive numbers attending the plethora of events – officially sanctioned by the ABA and otherwise – across the country.

While events were planned for the entire year, the PR campaign quickly wound down – its job of promoting the event had largely been accomplished. Some four months after the main celebrations, the NSW Bicentennial Council informed its PR consultancy and advertising agency that their services were no longer needed (Ashton, 1989, p. 142). Reflecting on the Bicentenary and the ABA's media relations, McCarthy commented that "I think the campaign worked", although she was less sure about the broader "ideas and issues" that had been conveyed (O'Brien, 1991, p. 300).

McCarthy's ambivalence concerned the fundamental flaw with the Bicentenary. As the "white Australia has a black history" slogan revealed, Aboriginal concerns could no longer be ignored. This issue had been flagged in a 1978 report for the ABA, which stated: "The Aboriginal peoples in particular may feel alienated from any celebration which recognises 1788 as the birth of the Australian nation" (O'Brien, 1991, p. 167). It would be the ABA's chiefs who assumed personal responsibility for steering a course between Aboriginal concerns and its own promotional role. Initiatives such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Program (NATSIP) therefore encouraged Indigenous participation. NATSIP's head, Philip Morrissey understood that the organisation and activities were implicitly involved in public relations:

He was intensely aware that just as Aboriginal 'participation' in the 1938 sesquicentenary had become one of the most enduring images of that period, so NATSIP for the Bicentenary would

provide a representative image of the 1980s. He knew that he was in a unique position to provide a snapshot of Aboriginal life that ... would both enhance black and white relations and provide enduring legacies (O'Brien 1991, p. 173).

While O'Brien notes that media coverage tended to marginalise NATSIP projects (1991, pp.179–180), McCarthy's comments, coupled with the more ardent criticisms levelled at the Bicentenary's "vacuous" nature and its inability to deliver any legacy concerning Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations (Bennett, 1992, p. xvii; Macintyre, 2004, p. 285), nevertheless placed this issue squarely on the PR agenda for future Australia Day events.

## **2008**

The lessons gleaned from the Bicentenary would have an ongoing impact on the way that PR practices presented Australia Day to the nation. Over the following decades, PR assumed an increasingly important position within the institutions responsible for co-ordinating Australia Day celebrations. John Trevillian, who had joined the NSW Australia Day Council in 1985 and is the current Chief Executive Officer, thus recalled that "Since 1988, we have developed a team of 35–50 marketing and communication people ... supporting Australia Day" (personal communication, 31 May 2009). The increase in PR practitioners coupled with the paucity of funding has meant that PR now plays a central role in the Australia Day committees' communication strategies.

The questions about Australia Day's relationship with the Indigenous population and, to a lesser degree, non-British communities did not subside in the post-Bicentenary year. Rather than ignore these claims, the Australia Day councils adopted an issues management approach. In 1997 the NSW Australia Day Council developed partnerships with the NSW Council for Reconciliation and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in order to integrate their concerns into the official programme. Such interactions led to the establishment of new protocols (such as the Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Land) and the *Woggan MA Gule* ceremony that officially launches NSW's Australia Day celebrations (Melrose, personal communication 19 April 2011). Similar inclusive efforts were also used to engage non-British communities. The concerted effort to reposition Australia Day as 'inclusive' and 'multicultural' was reflected in media reports. By 2003, the NSW Australia Day Council's review of media coverage revealed that such repositioning was proving successful: "generally, this issue [Invasion Day] appeared in articles which viewed Australia Day celebrations favourably. Coverage focused on this year's celebrations as inclusive and the most harmonious ever, with much involvement of indigenous people" (CARMA, 2003, p.11).

The NSW Australia Day Council's commissioning of in-depth analysis of the media's coverage of Australia Day events reveals an ongoing sensitivity about the ways that Australia Day and Australia Day events are perceived. Such reports seek to identify the volume of coverage attracted, the favourability of such coverage, and which events, sponsors, themes, and individuals generated the greatest media attention. From the Council's viewpoint, 2008 had been a successful year. The *Report's* key findings (CARMA, 2008) revealed that there had been 821 Australia Day-related items in the press and broadcast media, an enormous increase on previous year's figure of 429 (p. 4). Favourability of the Council's supported or endorsed events had also increased, from 44 per cent positive and 55 per cent neutral in 2007 to 74.6 per cent positive and 25 per cent neutral in 2008. Only two items had been negative (p. 6). In terms of exposure, the report found that 39 per cent of press articles featured relevant photos and logos, another increase on the previous year (p. 4). References to sponsors were mixed. Although retailer Woolworths had attracted coverage for its

sponsorship of the Australia Day Ambassador programme, references to the supermarket chain had decreased. In contrast, sponsors of particular events, such as the NRMA Motorfest, fared well (p. 4). Their importance is further underscored in the report's conclusions and recommendations, which sought to account for the coverage devoted to sponsors and, indeed, reflect on possible strategies to increase sponsor references across the different media outlets (p. 4). While the Council's public relations activities were displaying positive signs, the report nevertheless issued a reminder that it could ill-afford to rest on its laurels.

In addition to providing a snapshot of public perceptions of Australia Day, such reports also performed a vital role in the development of the Council's PR strategies. The reports function as a gauge for Australia Day councils to assess the success of their PR strategies in relation to previous efforts and desired goals. Moreover, they identify future opportunities. By using these insights to inform subsequent initiatives, practices, and strategies, such reports have given formal recognition to the relationship between PR and 26 January that has been cultivated since 1818.

## **Conclusions**

The New South Wales Australia Day Council's annual reports underscore the importance ascribed to public relations in the early twenty-first century. PR is integral to promoting Australia Day and its messages and framing of national identity. While PR activities have varied in form and nomenclature over the years, it is clear that a range of PR activities have been consistently used to create and promote Australia Day on 26 January since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Public events with communication as well as entertainment objectives; public information literature such as posters, newsheets and flyers; lobbying and public affairs by interest groups; engagement of key stakeholders such as indigenous groups through communication; and community relations activities through networks, public meetings and regional tours – all recognised public relations practices – have been deployed in relation to Australia Day since the mid-nineteenth century.

Significantly, this analysis also highlights the shortcomings of attempts to trace the history of public relations in Australia. In addition to demonstrating Zawawi's erroneous dating of the arrival of public relations in Australia in the interwar period, this study has also challenged assumptions that have underpinned what has become a common orthodoxy in Australian public relations research. Moreover, it illustrates the need for researchers to pay closer attention to the importance of context and to recognise that the history of the term public relations is not necessarily the same as the history of these practices.

This study has further problematised the assertion that public relations is mere 'spin' – its multifaceted engagement with Australia Day indicates that public relations has occupied a more central role in everyday life than critics and proponents suggest. Australia Day's emergence as the national day was neither guaranteed nor uncontested. Its status was therefore the result of an ongoing though variable public relations campaign that has spanned the 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the present. As a case study, Australia Day not only highlights public relations' extended presence and the degree to which public relations has been embedded in everyday Australian society and culture, it also points to the opportunities and insights to be gained by casting new light on the public relations blind spot.

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