

Celebratory Hopes and Populist Fears at the Millennium

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Three recent events have shed light on Australian hopes and fears:

- the Olympic Torch relay and Cathy Freeman lighting the cauldron at the Sydney Olympics 2000
- the Millennium Fireworks of New Years Eve, December 2000 and Federation Day on January 1 2001
- the wearing of an Australian flag as a symbolic cloak or coat, an expression of her One Nation Party, by Pauline Hanson.

They constitute a symbolic trilogy, one emblematic of Australian debates and destinies at the turn of the millennium.

The subject raised by all three phenomena involves historical memory and Australia's sense of its past, present and future. They help answer such important questions as: How does a New World society remember its past? How does it use the past to analyse the present and imagine or envision the future at the turn of the Millennium? How do contemporary celebrations interact with current angsts about the present and the future? Specifically, it explores how celebratory moments and events relate to the other side of the coin, pessimistic views, expressed in populist hopes and fears and in disillusionment with politics. Early in the new millennium, at a time of globalisation and consequent social change and cultural anxiety, Australian experiences may be of significance for other countries including Japan.

Other questions follow. Are Australia's sporting heroes more valued than heroes in the arts, science or politics? Do Australians prefer a party to meaningful reflection? Or has Australian society, for good and bad, a poor sense of historical memory - Australians look forward not back?

Having demonstrated that festivals and celebrations have always been important in a new world society, the analysis moves to recent symbolic moments: the Olympic Torch, the Federation anniversary and Pauline Hanson and the Australian flag.

Each of the three events involved celebratory hopes and popular fears. The Olympic Torch pitted optimistic hopes against the distrust of sporting elites. Cathy Freeman lighting the cauldron after receiving the torch from the famous women athletes gave hope of a new future in the 21st century. Federation celebrations led to reflections on achievement but also contemporary anxiety, including concern over Australians' ignorance of their own history. Pauline Hanson looked backwards. Her populist politics offered hope to some older Australians, fearful about a changing Australia, but at the cost of increasing their fears of the new and different. In this Australian story can be discerned the shapes of contemporary hope and fear in a global era.