

Which Day Makes Australia Truly Great?

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May 9 or April 25 or January 26? Which marks the birth of the nation? When was Australia really born?

Almost unique among 21st century nations, Australia has a choice between embracing the past or claiming the future. Two of these dates commemorate an ancient cultural mechanism that is slowly losing its power. One date marks an emerging culture-creating mechanism that, for the time being, is weak and undeveloped.

To understand this we must see how nations traditionally have been formed, and how remarkable was Australia's founding.

Rene Girard, a French academic, showed us that communities are normally created in an act of violence against a scapegoat. Nations are born in violence. They discover a sense of "community" when that violence is directed against a common victim.

This common cause creates a profound passion of togetherness. This passion results in unity. Community is formed.

So the Hebrews found nationhood in their exodus from Egyptian oppression. They commemorate it in the Passover every year.

The French found nationhood in their revolution against the aristocrats. They commemorate it on July 14.

The Americans found nationhood in their war against the British colonisers. They commemorate it on July 4.

Surprisingly the violent event does not even have to be a victory. A dramatic loss, such as the Serbs suffered in 1389 against the Turks, can be equally foundational. So long as those ancient Turks can be regularly blamed and especially if there is a national hero figure such as the Serb leader, Tsar Lazar, who can be seen to have "given his life for the nation."

These are recent and traceable founding events. For many ancient societies, the original violent event is lost in myth and obscurity. Yet Girard's work showed that unity created through violence and scapegoating is a universal phenomenon.

Unfortunately, the passion created in the violent event fades with time. Unity breaks down as the memory fades. Nations find it is necessary to regenerate the feeling. So they regenerate the violent event. So we have public holidays, street marches, commemorations, religious ceremonies, that symbolise the violence in socially acceptable ways.

More subtle mechanisms are socially approved to reinforce the scapegoating mechanism. This explains the underlying values of violence and scapegoating in things like Question Time in parliament, fanatical support for AFL teams, Melbourne/Sydney rivalry, and so on. Each of these offer socially acceptable opportunities to create community cohesion.

April 25 qualifies as our national birthday on this basis. It is, like the massacre of the flower of Serbian youth in 1389, a monumental and violent defeat. The modern tendency is to blame the British for the defeat, rather than the Turks. This is no

surprise. The British officers represent the ruling classes. By scapegoating them for the Gallipoli loss, we also undermine their right to rule in general.

January 26 can only qualify as our national birthday if it commemorates the defeat of the Aboriginal nations. In earlier generations, such a victory would have been celebrated and commemorated, and the Aborigines routinely scapegoated for “rightfully” losing the battle against “a morally superior civilisation.”

It is encouraging that one never hears this proposed these days. It is a sign of the increasing maturity of Australia (and hopefully, the world).

How then can May 9 qualify as a national day?

The answer is that something unique and amazing happened in the establishment of Australia. As Michael Gordon points out on the front page of yesterday’s “The Age”, Australia was “the first liberal democracy in the world to result from a democratic vote of the people, unpressured by external threat or internal coercion.”

Given the whole history of humankind, this represented a truly phenomenal breakthrough. No enemy. No war. No violence. No scapegoat. Community created around a common aspiration to be a nation.

In my work with World Vision in many of the world’s trouble spots, we discovered that two contrasting methods are now being used to create community.

One is the common cause against a scapegoat-victim. This is the underlying cause of so-called ethnic hatred. It remains effective, but all the indicators are that it is steadily losing its power to generate community. Its effects are shorter and shorter. And greater and greater violence is required to generate those effects.

The other method is the building of local capacities for peace. This is the true Aussie way. Finding, supporting, celebrating and resourcing those people who are peace-makers. So far, this method is weak and under-resourced. But, unlike the road to violence, it is growing in power and effectiveness.

Both methods are operating side-by-side in the world today. In Russia, Putin is returning his nation to the values of the 19th century Tsarist kingdom and scapegoating the Chechens on the way. At the same time, local cooperatives are forming to combat corruption and build community.

Both methods are present in Australia too. Anzac Day is increasingly mythologised as the generations change. The idea grows of a nation founded in pyrrhic victory. Supporting this phenomenon are all the mechanisms of socially condoned violence.

If this is what we choose to celebrate, then we shall be offering little hope to a world increasingly mired in the excesses of violence. There is a continuum running through Question Time, Carn the Pies, ethnic violence in soccer, refugee abuse, and all out ethnic warfare. Drawing an acceptable line in the sand becomes increasingly difficult.

On the other hand, Australia, 100 years on, has one more chance to embrace change and to point the way to a future of peace.

Something world changing happened in 1901 in this country. A flag of peace and hope was planted. A rallying point for community created in a common cause for simple nationhood. Australia led the world. Do we still?