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“Speaking to You on the Birthday of the Nation”: Vice-Regal Rhetoric on Australian Identity

ABSTRACT

This article considers the effect of vice-regal authority on the formation of Australian identity. A position which was constructed as a ‘Britishness device’ has been appropriated to ‘depict the Australian nation to its people.’ A key opportunity for such advocacy is the Governor-General’s Australia Day address, broadcast since the 1940s. The article will analyse the complex interplay between national and imperial loyalties. ‘Australianness’ was not solely the domain of Australian born viceroyos; Field-Marshal William Slim spoke repeatedly about ‘mateship’ and used his military background to propagate the Anzac legend. Just as British born Governors-General used their perspective, in particular their ‘first impressions’ or ‘outback experiences’ to encapsulate Australia, locally born Governors-General saw their role partly as promoting Australia’s British, monarchical heritage, complicating a view of the office as an imperial post which has been successfully ‘indigenised.’ While the power of vice-regal oratory to capture the public imagination has proved limited, examining the content and reception of these addresses over the decades provides a useful indicator of how the phraseology of identity has been transformed.

BIOGRAPHY

Robert O’Shea is a second-year MA candidate at the University of Melbourne. His thesis examines the Australian Governor-Generalship from 1936 to 1986, assessing the changes in the social status, political influence and public rhetoric of the vice-regal position as the role was transformed from a British imperial figurehead to a largely Australianised, yet still monarchical, constitutional actor.
“Speaking to You on the Birthday of the Nation”: Vice-regal Rhetoric on Australian Identity

“This is Australia Day. Australia’s national day. There will be no spectacular expressions of national feeling. As a people, we have not the habit of displaying deep emotion on occasions such as this.”

It is paradoxical that the subdued nature of Australian nationalism has itself been cited as a cause for celebration. The apathy surrounding civic ceremonies such as Australia Day has been claimed by orators and editorialists as a sign of national maturity, a careful avoidance of the excesses of nationalism. The lack of spontaneity surrounding the national holiday is epitomised by the ritual of the Governor-General’s Australia Day broadcast, a pre-recorded address to the nation issued annually since 1948. Like other civicly-minded Australia Day events, such as flag raising and citizenship ceremonies, the vice-regal broadcasts have failed to capture the public imagination. There has always been ambiguity over the significance of elevating Australia Day into a national day of civic celebration. In the 1940s and 1950s there was discomfort in celebrating the foundation of a penal colony, when other nations celebrated successful revolutions or battles on their national days. In 1959 Field-Marshal Sir William Slim declared that Australia Day was unique in not marking a ‘battle won (or) the success of a rebellion.’ Since then the revival of Anzac Day as a commemoration of a ‘successful’ failure at Gallipoli has heightened the predominance of military mythology over the convict narrative of the first fleet. More importantly, the positioning of the landing at Port Jackson in 1788 as a ‘peaceful’ foundation has been undercut by a belated public awareness of violence against Indigenous peoples in the ensuing colonisation. Unsurprisingly, the contested notion of January 26 as ‘invasion day’ was not acknowledged in vice-regal oratory; indeed, in the 1980s the dubious notion of Australia Day as the ‘birthday’ of a young nation was reimposed by the promotion of the 1988 bicentenary. This article does not intend to add to what Ruth Wajnryb has called ‘our annual Australian angst-fest’ over the meaning of Australia Day. Rather, it seeks to use a long-standing and well-documented element of the national day – the Governor-General’s address – to provide a content analysis of how the rhetoric of patriotism evolved in the five decades leading up to the passage of the Australia Act in 1986, which removed the last legal vestiges of British imperial governance. The remaining monarchical link, symbolised locally by the Governor-General, was by the 1980s a position consistently held by an Australian-born representative. The continuity in format of the addresses since the 1940s – a four to ten minute monologue – lends itself to a comparison of the speeches made by Governors-General during the transition from British to Australian viceroyos. While the literature on Australia’s search for a cohesive national identity is vast, few scholars have scrutinised the official pronouncements on the theme. An exception is James Curran, whose 2004 book *The Power of Speech* considered how Prime Ministers attempted to ‘define the national image.’ However, analysing the statements of Governors-General is arguably more insightful as their utterances are consciously symbolic; whereas politicians muse on ‘big picture’ notions such as identity as a diversion from party politics, national identity is a full-time theme for Governors-General, as it is a topic of broad interest, yet is abstract enough to avoid commenting on particular government policies. However, it should not be assumed that all vice-regal discourses on identity have been apolitical and uncontroversial. This article will highlight addresses which garnered public attention and were indicative of a change in the conceptualisation of Australian nationhood, even if as a whole the Australia Day addresses have failed to raise vice-regal prestige or provide a definitive meaning to the national day.

There is extensive literature on the construction of nationalism through printed material and mass media, most notably Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities.* However, few of the works inspired by Anderson’s theory look specifically at how national identity is articulated through the transmission of the ‘address to the nation’; a format that presupposes a clearly delineated national audience and largely operates outside commercial media considerations. There has been high awareness, and frequent satire, of the lengthy broadcasts used by autocratic leaders such as Fidel Castro and Muammar Gaddafi, and strong political analysis of the regular teletcasts made by executive leaders such as the President of the United States, but there has been little

1 Opening of William McKell’s Australia Day Address, 1948. William McKell, “1948 Australia day talk by His Excellency the Governor-General, the Rt Hon W. J. McKell” in National Library of Australia (N. L. A.) ‘Governor-General’s Australia Day Broadcast Address’ (Canberra: Government House, n.d.).
2 William Slim, ‘His Excellency the Governor General Australia day broadcast 26th January 1959’ in N. L. A. ‘Governor-General’s Australia Day Broadcast Address’ (Canberra: Government House, n.d.).
attempt to assess the impact of the ritualised addresses of ceremonial leaders. For example, the Queen’s Christmas message is analogous to the Governor-General’s Australia Day message, but while the Queen’s words receive journalistic coverage, there has been no attempt to examine how the addresses as a whole represent a transformation in the rhetoric of empire, commonwealth and nation. Marian McLeod’s *Commonwealth Public Address: Essays in Criticism* argues the speech making of self-proclaimed ‘Commonwealth’ figures such as Robert Menzies has contributed to an identifiable ‘canon’ of rhetoric deriving from British notions of public discourse, but does not consider how any collective identity is promoted or sustained. There have been edited collections of vice-regal speeches made by Paul Hasluck and Zelman Cowen, but these are only accompanied by brief prefaces. A rare theoretical approach to the form of national address can be seen in Homi Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration*, which observes that the ‘address to the nation as narration stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority.’ In the case of the Governor-Generalship there has been a perceptible, but non-linear decline in cultural authority as the monarchy was diminished as a marker of identity, while the vice-regal exercise of political power, seen in the 1975 dismissal of the Whitlam Government, garnered public attention for the office but did not enhance its cultural authority. Bhabha observes the difficulty of encapsulating any nation through the oratory of a single person, noting that ‘it is a mark of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy...[that] produces a continual slippage into analogous, even metonymic categories like the people.’ The ability of a viceroy to speak ‘in the name of the people’ is further circumscribed as the Governor-General has neither the longevity of a monarch nor the mandate of an elected leader.

The position of Governor-General is emblematic of the contradictions contained within the concept of Australian identity. The Governor-General is the representative of the British monarch, and until the 1960s was usually an ‘imported’ British soldier or politician, but is also expected to identify and verbalise distinctly Australian attributes. In this sense, the tensions between the origins and responsibilities of the office exemplify Australia’s ambiguous relationship with the notion of Britishness, which Sara Wills has contended, was ‘both the foundation upon which notions of Australianness were constructed and also that against which Australian nationalism sought to define itself.’ It is significant that it is the office of Governor-General, a clear legacy of British colonialism, which is used as the vehicle to promote the uniqueness of Australia, of its national day. This is an exemplar of what Jim Davidson’s describes as ‘de-dominionisation,’ wherein a hitherto derivative culture and polity attempts to replace British hegemony with local cultural output by reappropriating imperial institutions. Such a framework is more effective in the case of Australia than postcolonial analysis, which does not satisfactorily address issues of nationality in self-governing settler societies where imperial identity was self-proclaimed rather than externally imposed. The term de-dominionisation highlights how this process of cultural change is necessarily incomplete, as an imperial legacy can never be fully disguised in a settler society which has dispossessed the original inhabitants; civic structures cannot be fully ‘indigenised.’ This process of de-dominionisation can be identified in how the title and purpose of the vice-regal office remain ostensibly unchanged, yet the status of the Governor-General has radically altered. Imperial iconography was retained, but no longer commands deference. Moreover, this transformation in authority has been accompanied by changes in the media and rhetorical style which have served to further undermine the ability of the Governor-General to ‘speak’ for the nation. The remainder of this article will chart this evolution from the 1940s to the 1980s.

The rise of the ‘address to the nation’ as a specific style of public rhetoric was propelled by broadcasting. As illustrated by the 2010 film *The King’s Speech*, civic speechmaking was no longer directed at the first few rows of the assembled guests, followed by an extract in a newspaper of record the following day. Radio added immediacy, theatricality and an unlimited potential audience. In this sense, broadcasts such as the King’s Christmas message undermined a key aspect of the vice-regal position; to be the local ‘voice’ of the monarch. The traditional vice-regal function of reading out a telegram from the King lost impact when British broadcasts

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McKell’s political knowledge also suited the Australian media landscape of the late 1940s, which can be viewed as the apex of radio as a medium for political communication. Inspired by Franklin Roosevelt’s ‘fireside chats,’ Robert Menzies commenced a series of relatively informal weekly broadcasts on current events during his time as Opposition Leader, while Ben Chifley also broadcast weekly until 1949. These direct appeals to the voter were accompanied by creative political advertising; in the lead-up to the 1949 election the Liberal party commissioned a weekly drama serial about John Henry Austral; an ‘everyman’ suffering under Labor’s petrol rationing and proposed bank nationalisation. In an environment where the opposition was presenting national broadcasts in addition to the government, vice-regal broadcasts arguably appeared staid. While the Duke of Gloucester invited journalists to work on secondment within Government House during his term, ordinarily the office had no public relations department. However in 1947 Murray Tyrrell was appointed Official Secretary to Governor-General McKell. Tyrrell was formerly Ben Chifley’s private secretary and had good relations with the Canberra press gallery. In the following year the first Australia Day address was broadcast. It was in the programming pattern of a wartime recording, being repeated four times during the day. By the following year


13 Australia’s Part – Mr. Menzies Broadcasts to the Nation,’ Sydney Morning Herald, 4 September 1939, 11.


16 Stewart Firth and Jeanette Hoon, “From Empire Day to Cracker Night” in Australian Cultural History, Peter Spearritt and David Walker (Eds.) (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1979), 32; “Empire as Example: Message from Earl Gowrie,” West Australian, 22 May 1948, 6.


19 Ibid., 315.

20 J. A. Blaikie, “It’s Not Easy Being Governor-General” Courier-Mail 16 November 1946, 2.

however, the familiar format of a single ‘set-piece’ broadcast was established, immediately following the 7pm news. Copies of the recording were offered to commercial stations, which usually simulcast the address until the 1960s. In his oral history recording at the National Library, Tyrrell is uncertain of the origins of the broadcasts, suggesting that they commenced at the invitation of the A. B. C. rather than by any active suggestion of the Governor-General or his office.23

As a local Governor-General, it could be expected that McKell would speak more passionately about Australia Day than a British import. Any emotive appeals from a local were tempered however by deference to royalty. In 1952 over half of McKell’s Australia Day address was devoted to detailing his visit to London to meet ‘all members of the royal family.’24 In 1953, he attempted to justify Australia’s preoccupation with its absentee monarch: ‘It may appear odd to the foreigner that on such a day of national celebration, the thought of a people noted for their vigorous Australianism, should turn naturally to a Queen in another land 12,000 miles away. To us there is nothing strange about this. We are members of a unique family of nations in the Commonwealth’.25 Such a contention highlighted the difficulties of instilling patriotism through Australia Day celebrations. Local festivities could not compete with the pomp of the royal events of the 1940s and 1950s; the royal wedding in 1948, the King’s funeral in 1952, the Queen’s coronation in 1953 and the royal tour of Australia in 1954. Moreover, Australia Day was not a coherent national event; it was only made a public holiday in all states in 1935 and events were organised on a state basis; the national capital, Canberra, held no commemorations.26 Even as late as 1968, the Commonwealth refused to fund any Australia Day events, stating, seemingly without irony, that the national day was a state responsibility.27 Broadcast on the A. B. C., the Governor-General’s address was the only common element across the nation. Therefore the address was not simply a reflection on a well-recognised day, like the Queen’s Christmas message; rather, it was part of the promotion of the day itself; and was burdened with justifying the day’s existence.

Given the lack of uniform celebrations, Australia Day speeches had to firstly explain what was being commemorated. Both McKell and Slim spoke of January 26 as the ‘birthday’ of the nation. However, this was ineffective as it appears that even the Governor-General could be ambiguous about the meaning of the day. In 1958 Slim proclaimed ‘whether on Australia Day we choose to commemorate the founding of the first settlement on this continent or the birthday, one hundred years later, of the new, united nation of Australia, we can at any rate regard today as a milestone’.28 Slim was more successful in positioning his broadcasts as a sort of a ‘state of the nation’ address; whereas McKell had spoken at length on the colonial past and the formation of a settler society, Slim was more concerned with reviewing Australian society in the previous year. Rather than treating national progress as an abstract theme, he assessed the nation in view of global market forces, pointing out ‘other people are not falling over themselves to buy our goods’ and proffered his own ambitious schemes for economic expansion, suggesting for instance that Australia could become ‘one of the greatest producers of rice for the Asian market.’29 Such rhetoric was a marked departure from the ‘Governor-Generalities’ usually dispensed by imported viceroys. Slim’s speeches were notable for their mixture of military rigour and colloquial language, and appear to be constructed to challenge Australian complacency. For example in 1954 he proclaimed ‘don’t wait for someone else to give a lead. That’s not the Australian way. In Australia you raise sheep, you don’t act like sheep’.30 He condemned the ‘dismal jimmies who go about moaning over the failings

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24 McKell, “1952 Australia Day address by His Excellency the Governor-General,” in N. L. A. ‘Governor-General’s Australia Day Broadcast Address’ (Canberra: Government House).
26 Ibid., 204; Curran and Ward, The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire, 194.
27 Prime Minister’s Department, memorandum, 14 November 1968, N. A. A. A463 1968/4286 (Canberra: Government House), 203.
of our young people." 31 Newspaper columnists of the period suggest that this casual mode of address was acceptable to the public because Slim did not deem himself an outsider; according to the Adelaide Advertiser, ‘listeners…liked his reference to Australians as ‘us,’ prompting columnist William Waymouth to declare ‘it’s nice to know that someone appreciates us.’ 32 Slim’s self-identification as Australian seems to have enabled more pointed criticisms; he called ‘slack working’ an ‘unforgivable sin’ and in 1956 he stated ‘I have seen in this country splendid examples of enlightened management combined with productive labour…but let’s be honest, not everywhere.’ 33 Such rebukes illustrate another distinct aspect of vice-regal rhetoric; as an unelected leader, the Governor-General could make declarations that it would be politically unwise for a Prime Minister to make. Slim and Lord Casey are both on the record as telling Australians ‘never had things been so good.’ 34 In this respect, the vice-regal office was advantageous to the political incumbents. The anti-communist campaigns of Menzies were lent urgency by Slim’s urgings that Australia is ‘like an army. We all win or we all lose.’ While Slim’s observations on industrial relations and trade could be interpreted as a critique of government policy, overall Menzies gained political mileage out of Slim’s determination to remove Australians from the comfort zone of the 1950s and place them back on a war footing. If Slim was too emphatic, as in 1956 when he declared ‘a lot of us were more at peace within ourselves when the war was on. Then we had our object plain before us,’ it was Slim rather than the ministry which appeared controversial. 35 His sweeping generalisations became renowned. In 1958, he said ‘science – if it doesn’t wipe us all out – will give us greater comfort and leisure.’ 36 The transcripts of Slim’s speeches suggest that his admonishments were interspersed with sincere praise for Australians, albeit within a militaristic framework, through his references to the ‘Anzac spirit.’ 37 In 1959 he concluded his address by saying ‘we are all on the same side, all Australians – all mates.’ 38 The enthusiasm for ‘mateship,’ revived as a marker of Australian identity by John Howard, may appear clichéd but in other instances he subverted the Australian mythology explored by the likes of Russel Ward. In 1958, coincidentally the year Ward’s The Australian Legend was published, Slim satirised the idealisation of the bushman, saying he realised that not all Australians were the ‘lean, bronzed riders of the coloured posters, cracking their stockwhips and gazing, keen-eyed into the blue distance.’ 40

Slim’s assertive style was distinctive and for his farewell Australia Day address in 1960 Lady Slim was invited to address the nation as well, the only instance where a vice-regal spouse has addressed the nation on Australia Day. In 1961, Lord Dunrossil delivered an address stating Australia is ‘so like Britain’ and I have not ‘had to make any mental adjustments at all’ and after his death the same year the Sydney Daily Telegraph observed that Dunrossil provided ‘none of the straight from the shoulder advice and good-natured criticism of the national foibles [of] his predecessor, Viscount Slim.’ 41 This was the paradox of identity in the early 1960s, Australia wished to be seen as distinct from Britain, but still wanted external validation. Dunrossil’s single Australia Day speech had emphasised similarities with Britain, but the four addresses of Viscount De L’Isle, the last British

31 Slim, “Joint broadcast address by Their Excellencies, the Governor-General, and Lady Slim on 26th January 1960” in N. L. A. ‘Governor-General’s Australia Day Broadcast Address’ (Canberra: Government House).
36 Ibid.
39 Slim, “His Excellency the Governor General Australia day broadcast 26th January 1959” in N. L. A. ‘Governor-General’s Australia Day Broadcast Address’ (Canberra: Government House).
Governor-General, accentuated the differences. De L’Isle described himself as a ‘new Australian,’ appropriating the term applied to assisted migrants to describe his privileged, temporary migration to Australia. In a nation still stricken by the ‘cultural cringe,’ a national address consisting of the ‘fresh’ impressions of a foreigner remained acceptable. As the last Governor-General to wear the ornate full uniform, replete with plumed hat, De L’Isle was closely associated with the imperial trappings of the post, yet his oratory, disclaimed any impressions of British supremacy over Australia by presenting Australia as a colonial power in its own right, stating ‘our flag flies from the Antarctic continent almost to the equator.’ By referring to the Australian flag as ‘our flag,’ De L’Isle simultaneously reinforces his claim to be a fellow Australian, while using his outsider status to observe that Australia possesses power beyond its mainland. In contrast, his successor, the Australian-born Lord Casey, seems to downplay independent Australian power and highlighted the need for Australia to have ‘strong friends, which at present we’ve got.’ Casey could make such a candid admission based on his lengthy experience as Minister for External Affairs. Moreover he said ‘our friends overseas will be much more ready to help if we…help them.’ In 1966 such a statement was a thinly veiled attempt to justify Australia’s participation in the Vietnam War, further indicating the potential for the Australia Day addresses to lend support to government policy.

The controversy over Vietnam was accompanied by much discussion of Australia’s identity; Britain was in decline and Americanisation was seen as prevalent, prompting leaders such as Prime Minister John Gorton to highlight the ‘new’ Australian nationalism. However, just as identity was becoming a decisive issue, the Governor-General vacated the field. A locally born Governor-General no longer had the role of giving an outsider’s perspective on the nation’s progress, so Lord Casey alternatively focussed on individuals. His 1967 Australia Day address was primarily about promoting careers counselling to young people and encouraging retirees to take up hobbies. In 1968 he encouraged ‘the big pastoral companies’ to increase agricultural productivity and urged wage-earners to ‘work more for the boss’ to improve the national economy.

The Australia Day addresses after the period being examined have also critiqued government policy on issues such as reconciliation. See Terry Smith, “The Governor-General and the Post-Colonial: The Australia Day Address 1996,” Continuum 11:2 (1997): 72-81.

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Casey could make such a candid admission based on his appointment by Menzies served only to prolong the imperial connotations of the office. It was Paul Hasluck who reinvigorated the format by featuring Australian landscapes. Instead of speaking from a studio he did outside broadcasts, first from Admiralty House in 1970, using Sydney Harbour as a backdrop. In 1972, he spoke from a local history museum in Jindera, southern N. S. W., to indicate that the Governor-General is not just ‘a person inside Government House…I try to get out as much as I can’. In 1974 he spoke from Governor Macquarie’s desk in old Government House, Parramatta, the oldest public building in Australia. The use of this historic location symbolised Hasluck’s faith in the past as ‘an age of elegance,’ in the face of the modern ‘age of

43 Nan Musgrove, ‘What does it take to make a Movie?’ Australian Women’s Weekly, 10 February 1971, 10.
45 Curran and Ward, The Unknown Nation, 5.
47 Ibid.
untidiness. Such an approach to the broadcasts, even with improved production values, heightened the potential for the Governor-Generalship itself to be seen as an historical relic. However, unlike Lord Casey, Hasluck seems to have confronted the new nationalism espoused by the likes of Donald Horne. Rather than pursuing new intellectual fashions, Hasluck claimed that “I want to get down to the roots of Australian nationhood.” While he conceded that the ‘job of the Governor-General is not quite the same as it used to be,’ he insisted that the central purpose of the role continued to be representing the monarch, now styled ‘Queen of Australia.’ He stated that ‘devotion to Queen and country, are shared by all who love Australia’ and that we should ‘not sniff at patriotism and loyalty.’ Such rhetoric appears dated, but Hasluck at least acknowledged the calls for maturity and independence put forward by proponents of the new nationalism. His addresses did not share the tendency of his predecessors to speak about Australia as a ‘new’ nation. In 1974 he said ‘we are rather fond of talking of ourselves as a young country…we have reached a vigorous manhood.’ Therefore Hasluck’s conception of national identity continued to appear narrow and gendered; he persisted in identifying an immaturity in national life, asking ‘are we growing up, or are we only growing older?’

It could be argued that Hasluck’s successor, John Kerr, continued the convention of giving an address from an historically significant location; after the dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975 the Governor-General’s office was such a place. In 1976 Kerr observed that ‘over many years Governors-General have watched and participated in the passing parade of Australian life, often from and in this study.’ Ironically, Kerr did not participate in Australia Day 1976; the address from his study was recorded before he left for a visit to London. The long shadow of the dismissal meant Kerr had little opportunity to contribute positively to the discussion of national identity; his 1977 broadcast is dominated by references to the Queen’s silver jubilee and the stability of the constitutional monarchy. Kerr’s intervention into politics effectively inverted the role of vice-regal rhetoric. If the office was perceived as non-political, it could contribute to public discourse as a detached observer of changes in the national character. However, Kerr’s act had changed the nation, spurring boycotts from Labor and provoking republican sentiment. In his 1978 address, Zelman Cowen spoke of bringing ‘a touch of healing’ to the Governor-Generalship after the divisiveness of Kerr’s term and arguably his more inclusive addresses set the pattern for modern addresses. The 1978 address is the first to concentrate on the Governor-Generalship itself. Cowen admits that ‘I have come to the appointment at a time when there have been tensions in our national life ‘and that the public profile of the office is largely due to controversy. While Cowen’s intention to explain the purpose of office was appropriate in the circumstances, and was a task he continued after his term in his writings, providing an address on the office rather than an address to the nation is a much reduced role, especially when Cowen admits that in spite of increased attention, the office remained poorly understood internationally. He recalls his attempts on a trip overseas to describe the role as both a symbol of monarchy and ‘a symbol of the unity of all the people.’ He concedes ‘I do not know whether I was perfectly understood, but I did not know how better to say it.’ The drama of the dismissal made it increasingly difficult for the Governor-General to represent either the crown or its citizens effectively.

Even if the vice-regal role was diminished in its ability to mould national identity, the Governor-General’s status as the archetypal ‘establishment’ figure ensures that an analysis of the Australia Day addresses over the decades

54 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
59 Hasluck, “‘Lessons from the early days” in N. L. A., Hasluck Papers, box 38 (Canberra: Government House).
60 Ibid.
61 John Kerr, “His Excellency the Governor-General Australia Day Address: Embargoed until 7:00p.m.” in N. L. A. Kerr Papers, MS 9524, folder 1. (Canberra: Government House).
62 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
provides an indication of when certain values became an established, constituent part of ‘mainstream’ Australian identity. For instance, McKell spoke only of ‘settlers’ at Botany Bay; the convict connection was not yet something to be celebrated.68 Slim was less averse to raising Australia’s convict origins, although he conceded that the British courts were also culpable for those who ‘had fallen foul of its often harsh laws.’69 Slim was also a proponent of migration, stating it would bring ‘a touch of Mediterranean colour and gaiety, [and] a livelier interest in the arts.’70 Yet his successor, Lord Dunrossil suggested ‘Those from the Mediterranean bring with them an ancient and tenacious civilisation of their own, but as the generations pass, the differences will become less noticeable and will ultimately disappear.’71 This highlights the difficulties of a top-down model of identity formation. With each Governor-General serving a relatively short term, inconsistencies soon emerge. Progress on matters such as Indigenous recognition was poor; in 1962, De L’Isle described ‘this great island empty and brooding from time immemorial as if awaiting the day of awakening when a great British seaman first touched these shores.’72 Despite public milestones such as the 1967 referendum enabling Indigenous inhabitants to be included in the census, it is not until 1977 that Aboriginal rights are recognised in the Australia Day addresses, when Kerr declares ‘it gives me great pleasure to be able to refer to aborigines as fellow citizens.’73

To some extent, the addresses of the 1980s can be seen as rectifying such omissions, and grappling with the problem of extolling the ‘birthday of the nation’ in anticipation of the bicentenary, just as the birthday metaphor became culturally inappropriate. Ninian Stephen’s addresses appear to de-construct the notion of a national address. In 1983 he observed ‘Governors-General have long sent messages to the people of Australia…year by year in counties all over the world messages are sent out on national days…exhorting, encouraging, sometimes admonishing.’74 His language emphasised individualism, saying ‘those who have chosen not to listen to this Australia day message, or who, having heard it, will disagree with it are, by these acts of free choice, celebrating their freedom as Australians.’75 The following year he prefaced his talk by stating ‘Governors-General have in the past given each Australia day an address to the nation, as I did last year. But this year instead of an address, a report to the nation.’76 In this report he spoke of encounters with Tiwi Islanders, navy personnel and teenagers battling depression. In 1985 he suggested ‘Australia Day addresses are usually rather inward looking’ before speaking of Australia as both a Pacific and Indian Ocean nation.77 These self-reflexive addresses were doubtlessly more challenging than the platitudes of the past, but they also represented a further marginalisation of vice-regal oratory. Even the Governor-General himself did not portray his addresses as authoritative.

Therefore, the attempt to make the Australia Day broadcasts into a vehicle for national identity largely failed. In 1986 Stephen observed ‘Australia day is very much a latecomer to the Australian scene.’78 This article contends that the unbroken run of vice-regal addresses since 1948 did little to confer legitimacy on the national holiday or enhance the symbolic import of the Governor-General. The addresses held greatest interest as a form of critique, as seen in Slim’s questioning of national productivity and Hasluck’s repudiation of radical nationalism in favour of ‘patriotism and loyalty.’ Obviously, vice-regal addresses cannot always be provocative; few Prime Ministers would accept the sort of examination of government policy undertaken by Slim, yet there remains a need for some sort of annual reflection that is not delivered by a politician or newspaper editorial. It is notable that in the last fifteen years the National Australia Day Council has organised its own Australia Day Address in the form of

68 McKell, “His Excellency the Governor-General’s broadcast 1950” in N. L. A., ‘Governor-General’s Australia Day Broadcast Address’ (Canberra: Government House).
70 Ibid.
73 Kerr, “1977 Australia day address, embargoed until 6.00p.m.” in N. L. A. Kerr Papers, (Canberra: Government House).
74 Ninian Stephen, “Australia day address 1983 embargoed until 6.00p.m.” in N. L. A., Stephen Papers, MS 7738 box 1 folder 1. (Canberra: Government House).
75 Ibid.
76 Stephen, “Australia day address 1984 embargoed until 6.00p.m.” in N. L. A., Stephen Papers, MS 7738 box 2, folder 12 (Canberra: Government House).
77 Stephen, “Australia day address 1985 embargoed until 6.00p.m.” in N. L. A., Stephen Papers, MS 7738 box 2, folder 12 (Canberra: Government House).
78 Stephen, “1986 Australia day address, embargoed until 6.00p.m.” in N. L. A., Stephen Papers, MS 7738, box 3 folder 16 (Canberra: Government House).
a public lecture; a sure sign that the vice-regal imprimatur no longer carries weight. Yet the choice of the 2011 Australia Day orator is revealing; talk show host Sir Michael Parkinson. Arguably this return to an Englishman passing comment on Australian identity marks a return, or perhaps the continuation, of the cultural cringe that inhibits the celebration of Australia’s national day. Similarly, the Australian of the year ceremony, conducted in front of Parliament House on the eve of Australia Day, represents another attempt to identify an individual who can articulate national values. While the Governor-General’s broadcasts on the A. B. C. continue to employ the stylistic conventions of a national address, complete with vice-regal fanfare and a montage of the Yarralumla gardens, the contemporary addresses tend to offer commentary on benign issues such as volunteering; there is no longer a sense that the viceroy can issue a challenge to the ‘subjects’ of the monarch. Instead, the Governor-General can only endeavour to influence a community which remains uncertain of its identity. After decades of attempts, Australia Day remains ‘a festival in search of a meaning.’

79 Damien Murphy, “After the Ashes comes perky Parky to proclaim that Australia has grown up” Sydney Morning Herald, 25 January 2011.