Australian of the Year Awards

A fiftieth anniversary history
Dr Samuel Furphy
Honour Roll

AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR

2009 Professor Michael Dodson AM
2008 Lee Kernaghan OAM
2007 Professor Tim Flannery
2006 Professor Ian Frazer
2005 Dr Fiona Wood AM
2004 Steve Waugh AO
2003 Professor Fiona Stanley AC
2002 Patrick Rafter
2001 Lt General Peter Cosgrove AC, MC
2000 Sir Gustav Nossal AC, CBE
1999 Mark Taylor AO
1998 Cathy Freeman OAM
1997 Professor Peter Doherty AC
1996 Dr John Yu AC
1995 Arthur Boyd AC OBE
1994 Ian Kiernan AO
1993 Awards program changed – no award
1992 Mandawuy Yunupingu
1991 Archbishop Peter Hollingworth AO OBE
1990 Professor Fred Hollows AC
1989 Senator Neville Bonner AO
1988 Harry Butler CBE
1987 Joan Sutherland OM, AC, CBE
1986 Sir John Cornforth AC, CBE
1985 Major General Alan Stretton AO, CBE
1984 Sir Bernard Heine AC
1983 Patrick White
1972 Shane Gould MBE
1971 Evonne Goolagong AO MBE
1970 His Eminence Cardinal Sir Norman Gilroy KBE
1969 The Rt Hon Richard Gardiner Casey KG, GCVO CH, DSO, MC, KStJ, PC
1968 Lionel Rose MBE
1967 The Seekers: Judith Durham, Athol Guy, Keith Potger, Bruce Woodley
1966 Jack Brabham AO OBE
1965 Robert Heydon MBE
1964 Dawn Fraser AO MBE
1963 Sir John Eccles AC
1962 Alexander ‘Took’ Sturrock MBE
1961 Joan Sutherland OM AC CBE
1960 Sir Macfarlane Burnet OM AK KBE

YOUNG AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR

2009 Jonty Bush
2008 Casey Stoner
2007 Tania Major
2006 Tania Broadbridge
2005 Khoa Do
2004 Hugh Evans
2003 Lyleton Hewitt
2002 Scott Hocknull
2001 James Fitzpatrick
2000 Ian Thorpe OAM
1999 Dr Bryan Gaensler
1998 Tan Le
1997 Nova Peris OAM
1996 Rebecca Chambers
1995 Poppy King
1994 Anna Bown
1993 Awards program changed – no award
1992 Kieren Perkins OAM
1991 Simon Fairweather
1990 Cathy Freeman OAM
1989 Brendan Borellini
1988 Duncan Armstrong OAM
1987 Marty Gauvin
1986 Simone Young AM
1985 Deahnle McIntyre OAM
1984 Jon Sieben OAM
1983 Michael Waldock
1982 Mark Ella AM
1981 Paul Radley
1980 Peter Hill
1979 Julie Soachicki

SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR

2009 Pat LaManna OAM
2008 David Bussau AM
2007 Phillip Herreen
2006 Sally Goold OAM
2005 Antonio Milinhos
2004 Tehree Gordon
2003 Bruce Campbell AM MBE
2001 Professor Graeme Clark AC
2000 Professor Freda Briggs AO
1999 Slim Dusty AO MBE

AUSTRALIA’S LOCAL HERO

2009 Graeme Drew
2008 Jonathon Welch AM
2007 Shanika Fernandez
2006 Toni Hoffman
2005 Ben Kearney
2004 Donna Carson
2003 Brian Carson AFSM
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In 2010 the Australian of the Year Awards celebrates its 50th Anniversary. For five decades it has been part of the celebrations surrounding Australia Day in January, during which time the award has grown steadily in significance. The Australian of the Year for 1960 was immunologist Sir Macfarlane Burnet; he received his award shortly after returning from Sweden, where he had been honoured with the Nobel Prize for Medicine. Burnet accepted the inaugural award at an Australia Day luncheon in Melbourne, and the honour attracted relatively little media attention outside Victoria. In contrast, the 2009 Australian of the Year, Professor Mick Dodson, received his award from Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on Australia Day Eve outside Parliament House in Canberra. Thousands of onlookers observed the televised ceremony, before enjoying an ‘Australia Day Live’ concert. The following day newspapers around the country proclaimed the new titleholder on their front pages.

The Australian of the Year announcement has become a very prominent part of the annual Australia Day celebrations. It has served an important role in drawing attention to Australia’s national day, which has historically struggled for the recognition typical of similar celebrations around the world. The award program has also grown in importance as a way of promoting active citizenship and recognising role models. Three companion awards have been introduced, recognising both Young and Senior Australians, and proclaiming the efforts of those who work at a grass roots level through the ‘Local Hero’ award.

Not surprisingly, the selection of the Australian of the Year has often provoked controversy – an early critic suggested that ‘almost any selection will appear invidious.’ It is a notoriously difficult task to choose one person deemed worthy of such a unique honour. Moreover, a quick perusal of the list of past winners inevitably provokes questions and debates about what it is that Australia strives to be as a nation and what fields of endeavour and types of achievement are particularly valued. Outstanding feats in sport have played a role in the selection of fifteen Australians of the Year – men and women who have risen to the top of the world in a wide range of sports. The prominence of sporting winners is hardly surprising given Australia’s fabled love of sporting competition, but have the awards adequately recognised other fields of endeavour? Thirteen winners from the sciences (including ten in the medical sciences) seems...
a reasonable figure, but is the artistic realm under-represented with only eleven winners (and most of these musicians)? Why is it that a remarkable eight indigenous Australians have won the award since 1960? Is it significant that only one in five winners have been women? The fact that these debates continue on the opinion pages of newspapers suggests that the awards have become a respected institution. They have provided a forum not only for the recognition of achievement, but also for an ongoing national debate about what it means to be Australian.

With a fifty-year history and a high public profile, the Australian of the Year Awards are unique around the world. It is unusual for such a program to have broad public support and the endorsement of its national government. In the U.S.A. the *Time* ‘Man of the Year’ (more recently ‘Person of the Year’) predates the Australian award by 33 years, but the *Time* award has not been reserved for any particular nationality. Furthermore, it does not necessarily focus on positive role models and has chosen such figures as Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin. Elsewhere, the Canadian Club of Toronto (similar to Australia’s National Press Club) honours a Canadian of the Year, but the award does not have a strong link with the national government. Since 2004 the ‘Great Britons’ awards program has honoured such figures as author J.K. Rowling and Olympian Sebastian Coe, but relies almost entirely on financial support from the bank Morgan Stanley and the newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*. The Australian of the Year award receives substantial sponsorship from private companies, including a thirty year relationship with the Commonwealth Bank, but its close association with the Federal Government ensures its profile and reputation is significantly enhanced.

The National Australia Day Council (NADC) has administered the Australian of the Year awards program since 1979, when it inherited the responsibility from Victoria’s Australia Day Council. The NADC’s mission statement demonstrates how the awards program fits its wider purpose:

The National Australia Day Council works with and for the people and government of Australia to:

- **Unite all Australians through celebration with a focus on Australia Day;**
- **Promote the meaning of Australia Day through activity, education, reflection, discussion and debate; and**
- **Promote good citizenship, values and achievement by recognising excellence and service to the communities and the nation.**

The third of these aims is predominantly addressed through the Australian of the Year Awards, which offer a high profile moment for the celebration of outstanding achievement. The awards greatly assist the NADC in its central task, which is aptly summarised by its Chief Executive Warren Pearson: ‘On 26 January each year, the National Australia Day Council encourages Australians to celebrate what’s great about Australia and being Australian.’ The Australian of the Year Awards have certainly attracted controversy and criticism, but in doing so they have advanced a national conversation – they have encouraged citizens of this country to consider, who are the ‘Australians who make us proud’?
Searching for a National Day

The Australian of the Year award has been closely associated with Australia’s national day since its inception in 1960. Australia Day has never been a unanimously supported date for national celebration, so the Australian of the Year award has often been linked to broader questions about Australia’s national identity. Furthermore, the award has never entirely avoided the debates that surround the expression of patriotic fervour in a country undergoing significant social and political change. The leading scholar Benedict Anderson famously described nations as ‘imagined communities’ – socially constructed groups of people who perceive that they have a common identity. In Australia, the nation has been imagined in a wide variety of ways: Australia’s changing relationship with Britain and the world, the role of sport in Australian culture, the impact of multiculturalism, and the status of Australia’s Indigenous people have all exerted an influence on debates about Australian identity. The quest for a national day has been part of the process by which the people of Australia have imagined for themselves a unique identity. Australia Day has been (and still is) a subject of debate, reflecting the fact that national identity is fluid and hard to define. The Australian of the Year award has had to negotiate this tricky terrain.

Although 26 January has been a significant date in Australia since 1788, the name ‘Australia Day’ was not used uniformly across the country until 1935, and it did not become a uniform national holiday until 1994. Australia Day marks the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove in 1788. Furthermore, the tradition of raising the flag on Australia Day is a reconstruction of Captain Cook’s actions in claiming the continent for Britain in 1770. Thus, Australia’s national day is explicitly linked with the British Crown’s claim of sovereignty over the continent. ‘Anniversary Day’ began to be celebrated in the early nineteenth century and for the thirtieth anniversary in 1818 Governor Lachlan Macquarie declared the day a public holiday. For some time it remained primarily a New South Wales celebration, as other Australian colonies were more inclined to celebrate their own founding days. Nevertheless, as the destiny of the Australian colonies began to converge, 26 January acquired a more general significance. Australia’s Federation in 1901 signalled a new era: the peoples of six distinct colonies, previously united by their (predominantly) British ethnic origins, were now represented by one parliament for the continent. The new nation proudly recognised its British origins; as New South Wales Premier Henry
Parkes put it, ‘The crimson thread of friendship runs through us all.’ Nevertheless, the new national parliament provided a stronger sense of a common identity around which a uniquely Australian form of patriotism and national fervour could flourish.

Despite this, there was no clear candidate for a national day. Those who hoped to assert Australia’s connection with Britain were inclined to promote ‘Empire Day’ (24 May). Other dates vied for official status, including the anniversary of Cook’s arrival at Botany Bay (29 April), but 26 January had a very influential organisation as its advocate. The Australian Natives Association (ANA), a mutual society for Australian born men, had been a strong campaigner for Federation. After debating the issue at a national conference in 1910, the ANA began to promote annual celebrations on 26 January. The Victorian branch of the ANA was particularly vocal in its support for what it called ‘Foundation Day’; curiously, interstate rivalry did not prevent the Victorians from championing the celebration of a New South Wales anniversary for the nation as a whole. It would be some time, however, before the day achieved a high public profile. In 1930 the Victorian branch of the ANA adopted the new name of ‘Australia Day’ and began a campaign to convince other states to follow suit; by 1935 it had succeeded, but celebrations were usually held on the Monday following Australia Day.

In the meantime, Australian national identity became more tangible. The enthusiasm for Federation was followed by the heroics of the Australian war effort – at Gallipoli and on the Western Front, and later during World War Two. Australia slowly wrote its own chapters in the history of the world; its link with Britain remained strong, but a distinct Australian identity began to emerge. The flourishing of Australian identity was also evident in artistic and cultural forms: the literature of Lawson and Patterson, the art of the Heidelberg School and the parochialism of the *Bulletin* certainly bolstered Australia’s sense of a unique identity. During the Depression of the 1930s sporting heroes like Don Bradman and Phar Lap provided cultural icons around which national identity could form. All of these factors provided the foundation for a more secure form of nationalism. On Australia Day in 1949 the new *Australian Citizenship Act* took effect, defining the legal meaning of being an Australian citizen and not merely a British subject living in Australia. Since 1949, citizenship ceremonies have been closely associated with Australia Day, providing an important forum for patriotic celebration.

Fittingly, it was the Victorian branch of the ANA that established the first Australia Day Council in 1946. The new council was a membership-based organisation that strove to educate the public on the significance of Australia Day and encourage celebrations. In subsequent years, various other states formed their own Australia Day Councils, and in 1957 these bodies cooperated to form the Federal Australia Day Council, which was administered from the various states on a rotating basis. The Federal Council attempted (without success) to formalise a relationship with the Federal Government. Nevertheless, a stronger sense of national identity gave impetus to the campaign for a more prominent national day. The Australia Day Council of Victoria remained a key advocate for proper celebrations, as it was the best resourced and most active of the various state based councils. It was to play a fundamental role in the early history of the Australian of the Year awards.
A New Award

“What I envisage is an award similar to the Oscar given to the best actor of the year in Hollywood. It would carry with it great prestige and honour rather than monetary reward.” (Sir Norman Martin, 15 January 1960)

Sir Norman Martin chaired the Victorian Australia Day Council from 1952 until 1970. He was a Country Party politician who had served as the Minister for Agriculture in Victoria during World War Two and as Agent General in London. A biographer of Sir Norman has described him as ‘an unabashed patriot, [who] publicly lamented the lack of enthusiasm for Australia Day celebrations and regularly berated the media for ignoring them.’ As the public face of Australia Day in Victoria, Sir Norman was always on the lookout for an opportunity to promote the national day. Accordingly, in January 1960 he launched the annual celebrations with the exciting news that the council intended to introduce a new annual award, which would be known as the ‘Australia Day Foundation Award.’ The honour would be presented to the person judged by a special panel to be the ‘Australian of the Year.’ Almost immediately, the more descriptive second title emerged as the preferred name of the award, but the link with Australia Day remained strong, as Melbourne’s Herald explained:

Sir Norman said it was fitting that Australia’s national day should be the time chosen for ‘full and proper’ recognition of an Australian who had made an outstanding contribution to Australia’s culture, economy, art, or science.

The Australia Day Council clearly hoped that the new award would help promote patriotic celebrations in January each year. From its very beginning, therefore, the Australian of the Year award was not simply an award for excellence, but a conscious attempt to promote a form of patriotic nationalism that has not always found broad support in Australian culture.

When launching the award, Sir Norman explained that a distinguished selection panel would be assembled to place the award on ‘the highest possible plane.’ For the first two decades the winner of the award was chosen by a panel of five including the Victorian Premier, the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne, the Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University, the Lord Mayor of Melbourne and the President of the National Council for Women. Although the panel was certainly distinguished, it would in time
become too closely associated with Melbourne to be appropriate for a national award. An amused journalist immediately identified this deficiency and dryly observed on the ‘Candid Comments’ page of the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

A highly select selection committee, all-Victorian, and including such dignitaries as Premier Bolte, the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, and the president of the Vic. National Council of Women, has been set up; a medallion is being designed; and the chosen one is to be transported to Melbourne to receive the award on Australia Day.

It won’t look so good if the choice should just happen to light on a Victorian first go off even though ‘nominations are to be sought from all over Australia.’ But let’s not be parochial. So impeccable a body of selectors might very well exclude the most eligible candidate, if a Victorian, simply to prove its impartiality.13

Apparently Sir Norman Martin recognised the potential that the award might be dismissed as a purely Melbourne affair. When he announced the inaugural winner in January 1961 he insisted that ‘the panel received hundreds of nominations from all Australian states.’14 In choosing an appropriate inaugural winner, the selection panel was certainly aided by the fact that its preferred candidate (who was indeed a Victorian) had the recent endorsement of the Nobel Foundation in Sweden. The choice of Sir Macfarlane Burnet met with general approval; even the above-quoted Sydney journalist endorsed the decision: ‘Having poked a little fun at the all-Victorian Australia Day Council’s plan to name annually an Australian “Man of the Year,” C.C. is bound to say that it has made an excellent first choice.’15 In Melbourne, the editors of *The Age* applauded the choice and proclaimed that the new honour was symptomatic of Australia’s growing importance in the wider world:

The new significance of Australia day is a symbol of the rapid growth of national strength and national self-consciousness. We are beginning to count for something in the world and we should be intensely proud of this fact.16

In its second year, the award once again went to an international identity, but opera singer Joan Sutherland was unable to accept the honour in person as her career was burgeoning. Her brother James attended the award ceremony in Melbourne only a few hours after Sutherland had received a five-minute ovation following her operatic debut in Rome.17
International achievement remained a key criterion in the early years of the award. In 1963 pioneering neurologist Sir John Eccles followed Burnet’s example, becoming the second of five Australians to take out the Nobel Prize/Australian of the Year double. International sporting heroes also figured strongly, beginning with America’s Cup skipper Jock Sturrock in 1962. Dawn Fraser was honoured in 1964, after winning the 100 metres freestyle gold medal at a third successive Olympic Games; she was followed later in the decade by world champions Sir Jack Brabham (motor racing) and Lionel Rose (boxing). The strong focus on sporting endeavour was evident from the beginning, but in the first decade achievers in the artistic realm were also well represented. The renowned dancer and choreographer Robert Helpmann won the honour for 1965, but was unable to attend the ceremony due to his role as an Ugly Sister in ‘Cinderella’ at London’s Covent Garden. Later in the decade the chart-topping musicians The Seekers were the first (and only) group to win the award.

During its first decade, whether it was honouring those who excelled in science, sport or the arts, the Australian of the Year focussed first and foremost on international achievement. This approach was reflected in the philosophy of the award organisers: ‘We regard the Australian of the Year as the person who has brought the greatest honour to Australia in the calendar year.’ Over its fifty year history the award has honoured many Australians whose achievements were of domestic rather than international significance, but in the first decade international accolades seemed to be a prerequisite. The 1974 Australian of the Year, musician Sir Bernard Heinze, was the first exception to this rule: although his early career had taken him to Europe, Sir Bernard’s outstanding achievement was a lifetime spent promoting classical music to Australian audiences.
Whose Australian of the Year?

During the 1970s the Australian of the Year award began to suffer from its close association with the Victorian Australia Day Council. The council had long been a leader in promoting Australia Day celebrations, so it was not unreasonable that it introduced an award of significance to the entire country. Nevertheless, there was always going to be a problem of public perception. Initially, this related principally to promoting the award outside of Victoria. The new award did not immediately attract interstate attention, but interest slowly grew until Robert Helpmann featured in a prominent article on page four of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1966. The Victorian Australia Day Council worked hard promoting the award with a carefully stage managed official announcement, which usually occurred about two weeks before the Australia Day Luncheon at the Melbourne Town Hall. In a quiet month for news in Australia, the award gradually became part of the news cycle, even outside of Melbourne. As the profile of the award increased, however, its Victorian origins became a liability.

In the 1970s, two rival awards (both called the ‘Australian of the Year’ and both awarded in January) challenged the authority of the Victorian Australia Day Council. The first competitor was *The Australian* newspaper, which introduced its own award in 1971. As the highest selling national newspaper, *The Australian* was well placed to promote its new award as a truly national honour. Furthermore, feature articles on prominent nominees were a convenient inclusion on a slow news day. Readers of the newspaper were asked to nominate candidates for the award, with the final choice falling to the editor. On several occasions *The Australian* has made the same choice as the Australia Day Council. A notable difference, however, is that *The Australian* award has often been presented to serving politicians, including Gough Whitlam, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke. *The Australian* award still exists today, despite various attempts by the National Australia Day Council to cooperate with *The Australian* and end the duplication. Today, the NADC award enjoys a higher profile and official government endorsement, which ensures that it is relatively safe from challengers; but this was not the case in the 1970s, when interest in Australia Day was limited and the Federal Government had no involvement in the award. As long as the strong association with Victoria remained, the Australia Day Council’s award remained vulnerable.

In this context, the introduction of a third ‘Australian of the Year’ award in 1975 was a particular concern. On this occasion the challenger was the recently formed Canberra Australia Day Council – a group of young and progressive Canberrans, who aimed to increase the profile of Australia Day in the national capital. Since 1957 the Federal Australia Day Council had attempted to bring the various state based Australia Day councils together, and to lobby the Federal Government for financial support and recognition. The Federal Council had little success, however, and remained an under-resourced secretariat that moved around the country from state to state. The new Canberra council was not affiliated with the Federal Council and pursued its own goals in Canberra, which were often at odds with the prominent Victorian council. In particular, the Canberra Australia Day Council was sympathetic to the emerging republican movement, while the Victorian Australia Day Council was staunchly committed to Australia’s constitutional ties with Britain.

Australia’s political climate in the mid-1970s nourished this division. After coming to power in 1972, Gough Whitlam’s Labor government had hinted at constitutional reform and had
supported the idea of a new national anthem to replace ‘God Save the Queen.’ In 1973 the Victorian Australia Day Council noted its opposition to the growing campaign to change the national flag and expressed concern at ‘trends to abolish the Monarchy, delete the oath of allegiance and also abandon the National Anthem.’ In this period the Victorian council also battled the perception that it was an exclusive organisation. In 1971 newspapers reported that the Australia Day Luncheon in Melbourne was not open to all who wished to attend; the council disputed this fact, but continued to struggle against the view that it was representative of the Melbourne Establishment.

Founding Chairman of the Canberra Australia Day Council, Frank Boddy, recalls that one of the group’s early campaigns was to turn the Australian of the Year award into a truly national award. He recalls that the Victorian council was not particularly interested in talking to his group. Consequently, Boddy and his fellow board members decided to introduce their own Australian of the Year award, believing that if Victoria would not cooperate then Canberra was perfectly entitled to give an award of its own. Significantly, the Victorian-based award had gained the endorsement of the Federal Australia Day Council in 1973 and argued for its legitimacy on that basis. Nevertheless, the rival Canberra group found oxygen due to the fact the Federal Council had not been successful in lobbying the Whitlam Government for support.

In January 1975 the Canberra council presented its first award to Major General Alan Stretton, the Director-General of the Natural Disasters Organisation. Stretton had risen to fame during the emergency response to Cyclone Tracey, which devastated Darwin on 25 December 1974. Given the circumstances, the announcement was bound to attract the attention of the media, but the profile of the new Canberra award was boosted by the fact that Gough Whitlam presented the honour to Stretton. Furthermore, over the next few years, the Canberra Australia Day Council made good use of the parliamentary press boxes to promote its award to the national media. Needless to say, the Victorian Australia Day Council was not impressed that another Australia Day organisation had copied its idea. Frank Boddy recalls that the Canberra council was aware that the awards duplication was inappropriate, and also admits that the
selection process for the Canberra award was hardly rigorous; but the Canberra council was primarily motivated by its desire to see Australia Day organised at a national level, with proper links to the Federal Government.

In January 1976 the Canberra council did not present a second award, an oversight that Boddy attributes to simmering discontent following Gough Whitlam’s dismissal. Soon afterwards, the Victorian council again sought (and gained) the endorsement of the Federal Australia Day Council for its own award. The following year, however, the Canberra award was revived and remained for three more years. The conflict came to a head in 1978 when Victorian Australia Day Council Chairman Senator David Hamer announced that he was ‘most annoyed’ at the Canberra choice of West Australian businessman Alan Bond. Frank Boddy recalls that he and Senator Hamer proclaimed the merits of their competing awards during a prime time television debate moderated by Mike Willesee. When the Victorian council honoured the National President of the Country Women’s Association, Mrs Raigh Roe, Hamer proclaimed, ‘This is the real Australian of the Year.’ Mrs Roe was diplomatic when asked for her opinion, noting she was happy that Australia Day motivated people to name Australians of the Year: ‘Perhaps it would be fine if there were more. There are hundreds who would deserve recognition.’

The impasse was resolved only when the Fraser Government created the National Australia Day Committee in 1979, which was given responsibility for advising the government on all aspects of Australia Day. With proper links to the Federal Government, this new body was able to take charge of the situation and resolve the dispute. The Australian of the Year award had been embroiled in a political debate about Australian nationalism. Certainly, the charge that the Victorian award was unrepresentative would not have gone away, no matter how many non-Victorians were chosen for the honour; but the issue was more about differing visions for Australia Day. The Victorian council was certainly conservative on many political issues, supporting the monarchy and opposing a new national anthem, but its selection process for the Australian of the Year produced an often-surprising list of winners over twenty years. In the late 1970s in particular, Victorian Premier Rupert Hamer’s selection panel was progressive in its choices, including the sixth female winner, Mrs Raigh Roe, and the Aboriginal land rights advocate Galarrwuy Yunupingu. In the end, however, it was unsustainable that the Victorian Premier should play such an important role in an awards program that had become nationally significant.
The National Australia Day Council

After the formation of the National Australia Day Committee (NADC) in October 1979, the Canberra council happily discontinued its rival award. The Victorian council announced its last Australian of the Year in January 1980, honouring the naturalist and television personality Harry Butler. In April 1980 the new NADC held an Australia Day Forum, where Chairman Herb Elliot led a discussion on the future of the award. The delegates agreed that ‘it is highly desirable that there be only one “Australian of the Year” using the guidelines established by the Federal Australia Day Council.’ Importantly, the forum also agreed that responsibility for the award should be transferred from the Victorian Australia Day Council to the NADC. Surviving records do not reveal how willingly the Victorian council surrendered its awards program. It appears that (at least initially) the various state-based councils were reassured that the NADC was a worthwhile new body. At the 1980 forum the Federal Council was disbanded and links between the new NADC and the state councils were established. For the Victorian Council, however, its role was significantly curtailed two years later, when the newly elected John Cain Labor Government created a new Victorian Australia Day Committee within the Premier’s Department, which soon replaced the Victorian Australia Day Council in the official national network. The Victorian council was thus excluded from an official Australia Day role: it continued its life as an independent membership-based organisation, but played no further part in the nomination and selection process for the Australian of the Year.

Meanwhile, the new NADC had made immediate changes to the awards program, introducing the first companion award for the ‘Young Australian of the Year.’ The NADC also took a new approach to the selection procedure, proclaiming that: ‘For the first time the 1980 Australian of the Year Awards were selected by a national panel of distinguished Australians representing many facets of our national life.’ The NADC invited ten prominent citizens to adjudicate the award, from fields as diverse as law, science, media, religion, industry, trade unions, and the arts. The NADC stressed that ‘every opportunity was taken to maintain its independence and autonomy.’ Despite such a rigorous approach, the first NADC winner was quite controversial. Details of the award leaked to the media prior to the announcement and rumours abounded that the NADC’s choice did not please conservative politicians. The Sydney Morning Herald recorded:
The National Australia Day Committee is annoyed over reports that Professor Manning Clark and Olympian Rick Mitchell will be named tomorrow night as Australian of the Year and Junior Australian of the Year. No one will say a word about the awards. But conservative Liberals are reported to be apoplectic – Manning Clark has been a trenchant opponent of Fraserism and Mitchell defied the [Olympic Games] boycott to collect a silver medal at Moscow.31

The Mitchell prediction proved to be wrong, as quadriplegic athlete Peter Hill took out the Young Australian award, but historian Manning Clark certainly spoke his mind on issues affecting Australia after he won the main award. He noted he was both surprised and pleased to have been selected and added, ‘I believe it is above politics.’32 Clark was an avid republican and an outspoken campaigner on social justice issues. To complicate matters, he had been nominated for the award by the Canberra Australia Day Council, which had a politically progressive influence on the NADC in its first year of operation.33 When the inaugural NADC chairman Herb Elliot resigned his position a few months later, Home Affairs Minister Ian Wilson denied reports that Elliot had been dismissed because of the selection of Manning Clark: ‘The reports are mischievous and without foundation and I refute them utterly.’34

Despite a shaky start, the NADC pursued its charter of promoting national celebrations on Australia Day. The first secretary of the committee, Frank Cassidy, recalls that a key challenge was the fact that Australia Day had a very low profile.35 In January 1978 Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser had remarked that ‘far more public fervour is displayed at the VFL Grand Final than all the Australia Day celebrations combined’; he suggested, however, that there was ‘a strong current of pride in Australia and a belief in its future destiny.’36 The NADC was formed at least in part to harness this pride and to promote a uniform national day; but it was a slow process, as the Prime Minister was not even in the country on Australia Day in 1980, preferring to attend celebrations for the 30th anniversary of the Indian Republic. Frank Cassidy recalls that the NADC soon realised the importance of the Australian of the Year award in promoting Australia Day. It has remained a flagship program for the NADC ever since.
The Commercial Imperative

Following the early departure of Herb Elliot, tennis champion John Newcombe became the second of five sporting identities to chair the NADC. In 1984 the Hawke Government upgraded its status to the National Australia Day Council and in 1990 it became an incorporated public company with a board of directors appointed by the Federal Government. For most of the 1980s and 1990s there was an expectation that Government seed funding would be replaced by corporate sponsorship and the NADC would become self-sufficient. The list of Australian of the Year winners provides circumstantial evidence of this shift towards the commercial imperative. The first three winners of the new NADC award were all extremely deserving but relatively unknown to mainstream Australia. Manning Clark was the best known (and most controversial) of the three, but few Australians would have known economist Sir John Crawford or Brisbane Commonwealth Games administrator Sir Edward Williams. These were not men well placed to sell Australia Day to mainstream Australia or to the corporate sponsors who would help the NADC become self-sufficient.

In the mid-to-late 1980s there was a recognisable shift in the NADC’s approach to the award: marathon runner Robert de Castella, comedian Paul Hogan, singer John Farnham and cricketer Allan Border were far more likely to draw attention to Australia Day when they won their awards. Farnham, in particular, was a very high profile winner in Australia’s bicentenary year, as he had recently topped the music charts with his hit song ‘You’re the Voice.’ The choice of Farnham certainly attracted attention, but it also attracted criticism from those who perceived a shift towards celebrity winners. The Sydney Morning Herald editors argued: ‘One worrying trend with the award is its attachment to ratings. This year’s candidates appear to have been people who held high public profiles.’ Several readers agreed. One suggested that ‘entertainment “stars”, and sports “stars”, no matter how likeable and persistent, are largely reflections of a society, rarely if ever people who shape that society deeply.’ Former NADC secretary Frank Cassidy recalls his own perspective, which was that John Farnham was a highly effective ambassador for Australia Day, and that the NADC board members were quite
conscious of the benefits of choosing better-known candidates. The year after Farnham was named Australian of the Year, the number of nominations for the award increased ten fold.39

A few years earlier Les Carlyon had written in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of his concern about the growing commercialism of Australia Day celebrations:

> Like a can of Fosters given a whirl in a concrete mixer, our new T-shirted nationalism bubbled over in the week of the Australia Day celebrations. ... [T]he new nationalism is complex. It’s mostly spontaneous and innocent. Yet there are strident commercial and political sub-themes, so not everyone is innocent. We are positively lusting after heroes ... but only certain sorts. ... Robert de Castella, a natural enough hero in a nation of joggers, is made Australian of the Year which, you’ll agree, is pretty high-sounding stuff. The same night you can watch him flogging Toyotas on TV which, you’ll agree, is pretty commercial stuff. Turn the dial and you can watch him flogging a deodorant.40

Commercial viability is not necessarily incompatible with an appropriate national awards program. Indeed, if the Australian of the Year program strives to speak to all Australians (which it arguably should) then financial viability should follow. Nevertheless, Phillip Adams, who chaired the NADC in the 1990s, recalls that the awards program was ‘always in peril of being gobbled up by corporate sponsors’.41 This was particularly evident in the mid-1990s when the NADC’s Young Australian of the Year award faced strong competition from the overtly commercial Channel Ten Young Achiever Awards. The two programs merged in 1995, and the NADC program subsequently took a more commercial approach.42 Following a decade in Sydney the NADC returned to Canberra in 2000, after its attempt to replace government funding with private sponsorship foundered. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet took up responsibility for the NADC in 2001. Since then stability has flowed from the council’s closer relationship with Government and the ongoing support of key sponsors such as the Commonwealth Bank.
United in Celebration?

Financial security is only one of the difficulties faced by the NADC over its thirty-year history to date. A more prominent challenge has been promoting unified national celebrations in the face of often-divisive political debates about the Australian nation. The NADC’s theme for Australia Day in 1981 was ‘One Nation – One Future’: it was an aspirational sentiment, as the country was divided on many of its national symbols, including the national anthem, the monarchy and the flag. In its early years the NADC focussed strongly on the theme of multiculturalism, striving to find unity between all Australians on a day that primarily drew attention to Australia’s British heritage. When the Bicentenary exposed (among other things) Australia’s fraught relationship with its Aboriginal population, the date of Australia Day again faced scrutiny. Furthermore, the NADC was unable to ignore both the growing republican movement and repeated calls to change the national flag. In 1991 the chairman John Newcombe wrote to his National Director on the issue of the republic: ‘I do think the NADC should have some opinion as to where we stand ‘as a body’ regarding what will be an ongoing debate for the next ten years.’

While Newcombe struggled to find a consensus on the NADC board, his successor Phillip Adams had a clear agenda and was more provocative. One of his first actions as Chairman was to redesign the Australia Day logo, which created a mini controversy because the Australian flag was removed in the process. The new logo featured a hand reaching for a star and was symbolic of Adams’ aspirational approach to nation building. There was a strong sense of the type of nationalism the NADC was trying to promote under Phillip Adams: it was multicultural, reconciled with the Aborigines and tolerant. The republic was not mentioned specifically, but it was clearly on the agenda. Adams lobbied for the NADC to take on responsibility for the Centenary of Federation celebrations; he hoped that on 1 January 2001 Australia would become a republic and New Year’s Day would replace 26 January as the focal point for national celebration. Under Phillip Adams the NADC chose an Aboriginal singer, an environmentalist (who was also an ‘avowed republican’), a leading Australian artist and a Chinese-Australian paediatrician. The winners of the Australian of the Year award thus reflected the politics of the time.
A prominent feature of the Australian of the Year awards program is that a significant number of Indigenous Australians have been honoured. There have been eight winners of the main award (fifteen per cent) and four Aboriginal Young Australians of the Year (thirteen per cent). It is a curious outcome given the troubled relationship between Aboriginal people and Australia Day; indeed, it might be interpreted as an attempt to assuage Aboriginal concerns about the national day. When New South Wales celebrated its centenary in January 1888, Sir Henry Parkes was asked what celebrations were being planned for the Indigenous inhabitants; he responded, ‘And remind them we have robbed them?’ Fifty years later Aboriginal protesters shunned the sesquicentenary celebrations and declared 26 January a ‘Day of Mourning.’ Since then the date of Australia Day has often been criticised by Indigenous people, who have described it variously as ‘Invasion Day’ or ‘Survival Day.’

When Sir Macfarlane Burnet received the inaugural Australian of the Year award at Melbourne’s Australia Day Luncheon in 1961, the guests were entertained by the famous Aboriginal tenor Harold Blair, who gently reminded those present that Australia had a history prior to 1788. Blair foreshadowed a major issue that has subsequently been extremely prominent in the history of the Australian of the Year awards. The first Aboriginal winner of the award was the world champion bantamweight boxer Lionel Rose in 1968. A somewhat overwhelmed Rose noted that he was more comfortable fighting than speaking, but when he did open his mouth he quipped: ‘One hundred and eighty-two years ago one of my mob would have been a dead cert’ for this.”

Three years later Wimbledon champion Evonne Goolagong took out the award. At a press conference she suggested that the award transcended her Aboriginality: ‘It’s something I’ve always wanted – to be known as an Australian. … When I was younger I was always referred to as an Aboriginal tennis player.’

Coincidentally, Goolagong received her award on the very day the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was first erected outside Parliament House in Canberra. The catalyst for the Tent Embassy protest was the McMahon Government’s refusal to consider the issue of Aboriginal land rights. The new Whitlam Government took a different approach and established the Woodward Commission, which recommended government legislation to return land to Aborigines.
The Fraser Government later enacted some of the recommendations. It is fitting, therefore, that the next Aboriginal Australian of the Year was Galarrwuy Yunupingu, a leader of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land and a strident advocate of Aboriginal land rights. As Chairman of the Northern Land Council, Yunupingu played a prominent role in the difficult negotiations surrounding the Ranger Uranium Mine in the Northern Territory. Victorian Australia Day Council Chairman Senator David Hamer described Yunupingu as ‘the dominant figure in the most difficult and complex task facing an Australian in 1978.’ Yunupingu noted that the award would give him a position of greater authority from which to negotiate in the future: ‘Governments and mining companies don’t normally deal with just any ratbags and radicals.’

In that year the rival Canberra Australia Day Council gave its own Australian of the Year award to another Aboriginal man. Senator Neville Bonner was the first Aborigine to serve in the Australian Parliament and was honoured by the Canberra council at the National Press Club. Bonner was a member of the Liberal Party and was a rare combination of an Aboriginal activist and a conservative politician. Yunupingu was critical of the choice made by the rival Canberra council: ‘By selecting their own do-gooder they’re breaking down the spirit of Australia as a nation.’ Interestingly, the Victorian Australia Day Council, which is often viewed as symbolic of the conservative Melbourne establishment, had chosen the more radical Aboriginal leader for its award. Nevertheless, when speaking to the press Yunupingu took a conciliatory approach to the vexed issue of Australia Day:

We are at last being recognised as the indigenous people of this country who must share in its future. This is not a day of national mourning for us. It is a day of rejoicing. We must leave history behind us and look forward.

The next Aboriginal Australian of the Year did not share Yunupingu’s accommodating approach towards Australia Day. When Lowitja (Lois) O’Donoghue was honoured in January 1985, Prime Minister Bob Hawke noted she deserved the award ‘for her work in bridging the cultural gap between Aborigines and the rest of the community.’ When it came to the national day, however, O’Donoghue believed the gap was too great. After receiving the award, she devoted her time to a self-funded national tour, on which she advocated a new date for the national celebrations. She later served on the National
Australia Day Council, continuing her quest for a change in the date.55

Australia Day marks the date on which the British Crown claimed sovereignty over the Australian continent. Until 1992 it was assumed that this act of dispossession was justified because Australia was terra nullius, or an empty land. In the landmark ‘Mabo decision’ of 1992 the High Court of Australia found otherwise. Once again the politics of land justice in Australia helped shape the Australian of the Year awards. In January 1993 the Torres Strait Islander Eddie Mabo was honoured posthumously as an ‘Australian Achiever’ (similar to today’s national finalists). The winner of the main award was Mandawuy Yunupingu, a younger brother of Galarrwuy and the lead singer of the chart topping rock band Yothu Yindi. Yunupingu was the first Arnhem Land Aborigine to gain a university degree and was praised for his work as the principal of the Yirrkala School. He was best known, however, as the singer of the Yothu Yindi international hit single ‘Treaty.’ Not surprisingly, perhaps, calls for a treaty with Aboriginal Australia were a little too much for conservative commentators already smarting at the High Court’s Mabo decision. Ignoring Yunupingu’s achievements in education and music, Sydney radio presenter Alan Jones told his listeners: ‘To promote people because of their colour or their history, rather than their merit, is the most intolerable form of racism, which gives of such an award say they oppose.’ NADC Executive Director Derek Speake argued that Yunupingu’s award was entirely justified and reflected the large number of quality nominations he received. NADC Chairman Phillip Adams quipped that Jones was simply annoyed he had been passed over for the award, but also said that Jones’s program ‘was an example of the type of bigotry that found a home on commercial radio stations but was gradually disappearing from Australian society.’56 Adams recalls that after the controversy subsided he joked that a new criterion for the award should be considered: ‘the winner must be someone who will annoy Alan Jones.’57

In the 1990s the movement for reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians was a significant and emotive political issue. Furthermore, it was one that the National Australia Day Council could not afford to ignore if it hoped to assuage Aboriginal concerns about the date of Australia Day. During the Chairmanship of Phillip Adams (1991-96), the NADC introduced a short-lived award known as the ‘Community of the Year.’ The inaugural award went to the Jaowyn Association, an Aboriginal community group from Katherine in the Northern Territory, which had a reputation for its ‘ability to generate and maintain goodwill’ while negotiating complex mining agreements and managing national parks. The Jaowyn Association was clearly viewed as a model for reconciliation:

The remarkable achievements of the Jaowyn provide a testament of hope and a way forward for all those committed to the process of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.58

The change of Government in 1996 altered the course of reconciliation, particularly after Prime Minister John Howard rejected calls for a national apology to the ‘Stolen Generation’ of Aboriginal children. A more strident political opponent of reconciliation was the Queensland independent MP Pauline Hanson, who commented unfavourably on the Australian of the Year choice for 1998. Aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman is the only person to have won both the Young Australian of the Year (1990) and the Australian of the Year award (1998); but Pauline Hanson claimed that Freeman was chosen for...
political reasons. Hanson was doubly concerned because the Young Australian of the Year for 1998 was Tan Le, a former Vietnamese refugee and community worker from Footscray in Victoria. Two key planks of Hanson’s policy platform were her opposition to Asian immigration and Aboriginal welfare. She consequently believed the awards were a direct response to her: ‘I do believe it’s because of me… It’s rubbing my nose in it.’ Hanson was strongly criticised by both the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader. John Howard described her comments as ‘a very regrettable, inappropriate, ugly intervention on Australia Day without any basis in fact,’ while Kim Beazley suggested Hanson was in ‘egocentric meltdown.’

Rather than enjoying her unique achievement, Freeman was drawn into a controversy not of her own making. Asked for her views on Hanson’s comments, Freeman said she was trying to ignore them: ‘I’m proud of myself, I’m happy. Don’t take it away from me, please.’

The whole saga was neatly summarised by Sydney Morning Herald reader Peter Dewey, who wrote: ‘Suspicion confirmed: Cathy Freeman is Australian of the Year and Pauline Hanson isn’t.’

Nevertheless, it is not only the Aboriginal winners who have commented on the difficult issues of Australia Day and Reconciliation. In 1981 historian Manning Clark argued Australia Day could never be a day of celebration for Aborigines: ‘For them it must be a day of disaster.’ When Sir Gustav Nossal became Australian of the Year in January 2000 his career in medical research was crucial, but his role as Deputy Chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was equally important. He, too, raised the issue of Australia Day, suggesting it would be good ‘if, by consensus, a more neutral day could be found, but that would have to wait until there was a greater degree of reconciliation.’ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the most recent Aboriginal winner of the Australian of the Year award, Professor Mick Dodson, was asked about the suitability of the national holiday in January 2009. He suggested a national conversation about the date of Australia Day, but Prime Minister Kevin Rudd quickly rejected the notion.
The most striking trend in the history of the Australian of the Year awards has been the high frequency of sporting winners. Fifteen Australians of the Year have had a background in sport, and the proportion is even higher for the Young Australian of the Year award. Some have perceived an overemphasis on sporting achievement, particularly in recent times. This debate peaked in 2004 when Steve Waugh became the fourth sportsperson in seven years to win the award. Waugh was also the third successive Australian Test Cricket Captain to take home the honour. Indeed, captaining the cricket team ranks second only to winning a Nobel Prize as the surest path to winning an Australian of the Year award. The inevitable criticisms prompted a response from both sides of politics. Prime Minister John Howard commented: ‘It’s not a question of sport or the arts. We can have both. It’s not a question of sport or science. We can have that as well.’ Opposition Leader Mark Latham also leapt to Steve Waugh’s defence calling him a ‘great ambassador’ for Australia.

The large number of sporting winners might be attributed to the fact that since 1979, five out of six NADC chairs have had a background in sport, including Herb Elliot, John Newcombe, Kevan Gosper, Lisa Curry-Kenny and Adam Gilchrist. The only non-sporting chair, Phillip Adams, recalls that during his reign he discouraged the selection of sports people, who he believed were over awarded as it was. Another former NADC board member, Marjorie Turbayne, recalls that there was always someone on the board who was violently opposed to sport. Despite this opposition, sporting achievement remains a key measure of greatness in mainstream Australian culture. Furthermore, international sporting competition provides an important forum for patriotic expression. Sporting role models are among the most influential in Australian culture so it is unsurprising that they figure strongly in the Australian of the Year awards.

It is a vast oversimplification, of course, to bundle all the sporting winners of the Australian of the Year award into the same category, so varied have been their achievements. Winners of the main award have excelled in cricket, swimming, athletics, sailing, tennis, boxing and motor racing. Furthermore, the detailed justification for each winner’s award cannot be so easily summarised. Some have been honoured quite simply for their unparalleled international sporting success, while others have been admired as much for how they have behaved in competition. In 1962 Jock Sturrock’s America’s Cup Crew won only one race in the best of seven series, but he won admiration for his sportsmanlike conduct. Sir Norman Martin told the assembled press that ‘it was not always the winning of a race that carried the glory, and that to have lost often carried a higher reward.’ In other instances, however, the sheer magnitude of sporting achievement was enough to warrant an award in its own right. The selection panel could hardly ignore Dawn Fraser’s Herculean achievement of three successive Olympic gold medals; but she was a controversial sports star and, shortly after being named Australian of the Year, she was banned from competition by the Amateur Swimming Union of Australia.

The proper balance between success and sportsmanship is relevant to two more recent award winners: tennis champions Patrick Rafter and Lleyton Hewitt. Rafter was named Australian of the Year in 2002 after two successive appearances in the Wimbledon Final; he was runner-up on both occasions, but like Jock Sturrock he won acclaim for his sportsmanlike behaviour. The following year Lleyton Hewitt succeeded where Rafter had failed and became Australia’s first Wimbledon champion in fifteen years – he was named Young Australian of the Year.
Year a few months later. Despite his greater success, Hewitt was often criticised for his on-court antics. In an article criticising Hewitt’s award, Peter Fitzsimons argued the Wimbledon champion was ‘a long, long way from being the pin-up for admirable behaviour the way Patrick Rafter was throughout his long career.’

But the Hewitt/Rafter comparison raises another important issue: apart from being ultimately more successful than Rafter, Hewitt also enjoyed another advantage – he actually lived in Australia. Since the 1960s absentee winners of the Australian of the Year award have attracted adverse attention. When Nobel Prize winning chemist Sir John Cornforth was honoured in 1975, The Age noted: ‘The Australian of the Year has not lived here for 37 years.’ In Rafter’s case, his residence in Bermuda (a tax haven) certainly attracted comment, although his extensive philanthropy in Australia tended to cancel out any negative perception. In the more recent era of professional sport, the philanthropy of highly paid sports stars like Rafter and Waugh has become an increasingly important factor in the Australian of the Year selection process.

Those who have achieved notable sporting feats have often received the Australian of the Year award as much for what they have achieved in other fields. For example, round-the-world yachtsman Ian Kiernan won his award primarily for his work in founding Clean Up Australia; the rubbish he had observed in oceans around the world inspired him to set up an environmental campaign that had an international impact. A few years earlier Kay Cottee was honoured as the first woman to circumnavigate the globe non-stop and unassisted, but of equal importance was her highly successful fundraising for drug education. In these and several other cases, the sporting success of Australians of the Year has often been only one part of a larger story.
Scientific Achievers

In 2001 the physicist and former Young Australian of the Year Bryan Gaensler told an Australia Day function that the nation lacked commitment to science: ‘We certainly have the levels of determination and innovation required to become world champs in science as well as sport.’ Gaensler cited university cutbacks and unfavourable tax laws as the key causes of concern. By contrast, the Australian of the Year award has shown a strong commitment to the importance of scientific endeavour. The 1999 Australian of the Year, Sir Gustav Nossal, was a tireless promoter of science in Australia; he explained that he would like to see Australia’s ‘fabulous scientists’ revered in the similar way to Don Bradman or Patrick White – ‘to stand beside them, as a different kind of Australian icon.’

Nossal’s former boss and mentor Sir Macfarlane Burnet expressed a similar view when he won the first Australian of the Year award: ‘It does indicate that the community thinks that science is important, which pleases me.’

Several of the scientific winners received a vote of confidence from the Nobel Foundation in Sweden in the lead up to their Australian of the Year honour, including Burnet, Sir John Eccles, Sir John Cornforth and Peter Doherty. In fact, of the seven Australians who have won a Nobel Prize since 1960, five have gone on to be an Australian of the Year the following January (the fifth being author Patrick White). Australia’s most recent Nobel laureates, Barry Marshall and Robin Warren, might consider themselves unlucky not to have been named Australian of the Year, although they were named joint winners at the Western Australian state finals for the 2007 award.

Sir John Cornforth won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1974 for his work on enzyme-catalysed reactions. He is unusual among scientific Australians of the Year in not coming from the medical sciences. Burnet, Eccles and Doherty all won the Nobel Prize for Medicine. Other medical researchers to have won the award include immunologist Sir Gustav Nossal, child and maternal health expert Fiona Stanley, and cervical cancer vaccine pioneer Ian Frazer. Notable medical practitioners to have won the award include the surgeon and war veteran Edward ‘Weary’ Dunlop, ophthalmologist Fred Hollows, paediatrician John Yu and burns expert Fiona Wood. Apart from Cornforth, the only scientific winners without a background in medicine have been the palaeontologist and climate scientist Tim Flannery and the naturalist and television presenter Harry Butler.
Sir Gustav Nossal offers two reasons for the prevalence of medical scientists in the Australian of the Year awards. He notes that ‘Australia, as a small country, has a surprisingly fine record when it comes to medical research. We punch well above our weight.’ He recognises, however, that it is not simply a matter of fine achievement, but also public perception: ‘Of the many pursuits in the field of human endeavour, few touch the heartstrings more than medical research.’ Medical researchers and practitioners have the potential to transform the lives of the disadvantaged, the helpless and the maimed. Fred Hollows devoted his career to curing blindness in Third World countries, and in Australia’s Aboriginal communities where Third World conditions prevailed. Experts in children’s health such as John Yu and Fiona Stanley rightly attract the admiration of many. Fiona Wood, the pioneer of spray on skin, was lauded for leading the burns team at the Royal Perth Hospital, which did great work following the horrific Bali Bombings in 2002.

The scientific winners of the Australian of the Year award have usually been unanimously endorsed by the media and have attracted little controversy. The key exception was Professor Tim Flannery, who was honoured for his commitment to raising consciousness about the global challenge of climate change. His award created waves at the time because he vowed to continue his critique of the Howard Government’s environment policies. With climate change emerging as key issue in an Australian election year, the Australian of the Year award once again flirted with political controversy. Importantly, the choice of Flannery drew attention to the fact that, contrary to popular opinion, the Prime Minister was not directly responsible for the selection of the Australian of the Year.

Professor Fiona Stanley AC
The Creative Arts

A common perception is that the Australian of the Year awards focus too strongly on sport at the expense of the creative endeavours. This bias is not entirely evident in the full list of past winners (particularly in the early years), but it is illustrative of a more general concern about the recognition given to creative artists and writers in Australian culture. Former NADC Chairman Phillip Adams recalls his first encounter with Barry Jones, the quiz show champion and Labor Party politician: Jones remarked that ‘you are ten times more likely to get a gong in Australia if you are a jockey, than a writer.’

Certainly, Jones’ observation is evident when the list of Australians of the Year is consulted. Academic writers such as Manning Clark and Tim Flannery have been honoured, but the only fiction writer to win the award was Patrick White in 1973, after he won the Nobel Prize for literature. White admitted he was not a patriotic person – ‘I’m not for nationalism at all – not for flag waving and drum thumping’ – but he was taken by surprise at the positive reaction to his Nobel Prize:

I am amazed at the way Australians have reacted, in a way they usually behave only for swimmers and athletes. I am very touched, and have been feeling guilty for some of the things I have said in the past.

The positive reaction culminated in his selection as Australian of the Year, but the reclusive White was reluctant to front the media and discuss his latest achievement. He did attend the Australia Day Luncheon in Melbourne, when he nominated three alternative Australians of the Year, including historian Manning Clark, comedian Barry Humphries and Sydney union leader Jack Mundey, all of whom he described as ‘mavericks who gave hope for the future of Australia.’

Although writers have arguably been underrepresented, the awards program more generally has not ignored the creative endeavours. There have been eleven winners whose achievements were in creative fields, with a particularly strong showing from Australian musicians, including Joan Sutherland, the Seekers, Sir Bernard Heinze, John Farnham, Mandawuy Yunupingu and Lee Kernaghan. A striking thing about this list is the range of musical tastes that it represents. Apart from the musicians, the Australian of the Year awards have honoured one dancer (Sir Robert Helpmann) one painter (Arthur Boyd) and two television personalities (Harry Butler and Paul Hogan). Phillip Adams recalls he was glad to chair the council that selected Boyd in 1995, as he believed that ‘national fervour had come from the artists more than any other sector.’

Adams credits artists like Boyd, Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker as nation builders; he also believes the Australian film industry played a similar role following its renaissance in the 1970s. Despite this, those working in the film industry have not attracted the attention of the Australian of the Year awards selection committee. Sir Norman Martin likened the Australian of the Year awards to the Oscars when he introduced them in 1960, but none of Australia’s many Oscar winning actors and actresses has taken out the award. Comedian Paul Hogan was named Australian of the Year in 1985 and subsequently enjoyed a successful acting career, but his award primarily recognised his highly successful tourism advertisements in the United States, which lifted Australia from 49th to first in the list of most desired holiday destinations.

Hogan was unable to accept his Australian of the Year award in person as he was in Canada filming the most commercially successful Australian film ever produced, Crocodile Dundee.

The lack of winners from the artistic realm is more evident in the thirty years the award has been run by the National Australia Day Council. During Phillip Adams’ period at the helm, the NADC
honoured two artists in four years (Yunupingu and Boyd), but since then country music star Lee Kernaghan (2008) is the only artist to be named Australian of the Year. Some have suggested this is due to the strong influence of sporting figures on the council. Professor Fiona Stanley suggests that ‘sports people have dominated the board in recent years, and it shows.’ Stanley won her award for achievements as a medical scientist, but has nominated several creative Australians for the award including dancer Stephen Page, composer Peter Sculthorpe, and violin player Richard Tognetti.

Many in the arts community perceive a need for better recognition of outstanding achievement of artists in Australia. Melbourne-based artist Kristin McFarlane, who designed and manufactures the Australian of the Year trophies, says she would like to see artists featuring more often as Australian of the Year finalists: ‘I’d like to see a bit more emphasis on the arts, but that is not just for the awards, but for Australia in general.’ Delegates at the Australia 2020 Summit held in April 2008 shared McFarlane’s view, identifying a need to ‘enhance community perceptions of artists.’ A key recommendation of the ‘Towards a Creative Australia’ stream was to ‘establish a Prime Minister’s Prize for the Creative Australian of the Year, as well as other awards for excellence.’ The delegates clearly recognised the need for positive and visible role models in the creative arts community.
An Eclectic Collection

Phillip Adams once described the Australians of the Year as ‘an eclectic collection of people who reflect the diversity of achievement in this country.’ It is certainly true that not all of those honoured are so easily categorised as ‘another sports star’ or ‘another medical scientist.’ Several winners have been nominated for outstanding public service, including the former Governor General Sir Richard Casey, the Official Secretary to Governors-General Sir Murray Tyrall, the leading government economics adviser Sir John Crawford, and the Commonwealth Games administrator Sir Edward Williams. Lieutenant General Peter Cosgrove rose to fame as the leader of the international peacekeeping mission in East Timor in 1999. In 2001 he joined Major General Alan Stretton as one of two military figures to be named Australian of the Year. There have also been two Australians of the Year with a religious background. Melbourne’s Anglican Archbishop was a permanent member of the award selection committee until the late 1970s, but in an ecumenical gesture the first church leader to be honoured was the Catholic Cardinal Sir Norman Gilroy in 1970. Two decades later the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane Peter Hollingworth was honoured for his long commitment to social justice as director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Only two businessmen have been named in 50 years, and they have largely been honoured for their achievements in other fields. The 1986 Australian of the Year was Dick Smith, who a few years earlier had sold his eponymous electronics retail store and branched out into publishing, exploration, aviation and philanthropy. The Canberra Australia Day Council chose Alan Bond in 1978 after the flamboyant entrepreneur bankrolled successive challenges for the coveted international yachting trophy the America’s Cup. Bond later fell from grace and served time in prison for fraud; his name is the principal blemish on the list of past winners. All of these examples show that it is an oversimplification to view the Australian of the Year awards as an ongoing battle between sport, science and the arts for prominence in Australian culture.
It is somewhat surprising that there has been relatively little public debate about the gender balance of past Australians of the Year. In 1961 several news outlets incorrectly referred to Sir Macfarlane Burnet as the ‘Man of the Year.’ The mistake was not allowed to continue, as Joan Sutherland took out the second award, but it is certainly true that women are under-represented in the list of winners. In 2005 Dr Fiona Wood became only the eleventh female winner of the award. Interestingly, a relatively high six female winners were chosen by the reputedly conservative Victorian selection committee in the 1960s and 1970s. By contrast, the NADC has chosen only five women in thirty years, while the rival Canberra Australia Day Council chose no women during the four years the award was duplicated. The NADC’s companion awards have taken more notice of women, including forty per cent of the Young Australians and around thirty per cent for the Senior Australian and Local Hero awards.

Professor Fiona Stanley does not recall considering the fact that she was only the tenth woman to be named Australian of the Year in 2003, nor did the media particularly notice it. Certainly, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions as to how the lack of female winners might be significant. The first five female Australians of the Year were honoured for outstanding international achievements in music and sport. Joan Sutherland and Judith Durham were outstanding musicians first and foremost. Similarly, Dawn Fraser, Shane Gould and Evonne Goolagong were champions in swimming and tennis – it is an indication of the gender politics of the period that all three had also been named ‘ABC Sportsman of the Year.’ By contrast, the 1977 Australian of the Year, Dame Raigh Roe, was recognised specifically as a leader of the community based women’s advocacy organisation the Country Women’s Association (CWA). Roe had held various leadership positions in the CWA, including National President, and had recently been elected President of the Associated Country Women of the World. Significantly, much of her volunteer work had been aimed at improving conditions for Aboriginal women living in her home state of Western Australia. Roe’s award appears to be the first instance in which the selection committee aimed to promote the status of women in Australia.

Since then, gender politics has played only a marginal role in debates about the Australian of the Year. In 1988 an uncharitable reader of...
the *Sydney Morning Herald* suggested that Kay Cottee had been honoured only because she was a woman:

Sir: Jonathon Sanders circumnavigates the world three times non-stop, the first time this has been done. After it has been achieved by many people (men), Kay Cottee does it once and is named “Australian of the Year”. Is this a case for the Sexual Discrimination Board?²⁴

The reader was apparently unaware that Cottee had raised $400,000 for the Life Education program to counter drug abuse among Australia’s youth. Furthermore, the rapturous reception she received when she entered Sydney Harbour the previous year clearly illustrated that she had inspired a nation.

Since 1988 only three more women have won the award. Champion athlete Cathy Freeman was named primarily for her sporting achievements, but in looking for a wider story the media focussed on her Aboriginality more than her gender.²⁵ Professor Fiona Stanley’s work in child and maternal health links her 2003 award more directly to issues affecting women. Similarly, when burns specialist Dr Fiona Wood was honoured in 2005 the media focussed quite strongly on her status as a mother of six.²⁶ Perhaps it is significant that both these winners were chosen during the tenure of the NADC’s only female chairperson, Lisa Curry-Kenny. Since Fiona Wood, however, four more men have taken out the award. The trends suggest that, if anything, it is becoming harder for women to win the award; and perhaps this is a more important issue to consider than the relative balance between sport, science and the arts.
For the first twenty years of the Australian of the Year Awards there was no specific honour reserved for younger Australians. Nevertheless, in this period several young sports stars won the main award, including Dawn Fraser, Shane Gould, Lionel Rose and Evonne Goolagong. Gould remains the youngest person to be named Australian of the Year; she was only sixteen years old when she accepted the award ‘on behalf of all those young Australians striving for excellence and a better way of life.’

During the presentation ceremony at Melbourne’s Australia Day Luncheon, Victoria’s Governor explained that Gould ‘had brought much credit to Australia at the Munich Olympics and her natural charm, academic ability and self-discipline made her a great Australian.’

Ironically, Gould shared the podium with a retired Supreme Court judge, Sir Reginald Sholl, who in his Australia Day address called for an inquiry into ‘the disorders, laziness and ingratitude of young people.’

Clearly, Sir Reginald saw a need for more youth role model like Gould.

Shortly after the formation of the NADC in October 1979, the Northern Territory representative Dr Ella Stack convinced her fellow board members to introduce a new award that focussed specifically on the achievements of younger Australians. The inaugural winner, youth unemployment worker Julie Sochacki, was named Young Australian of the Year in January 1980. The NADC coordinated the announcement with the Victorian Australia Day Council, which choose the Australian of the Year for the last time. The following year, the NADC assumed responsibility for both awards. Sochacki was described as a ‘student nurse drop-out’ who set up a volunteer employment bureau to help those, like herself, who were struggling to find a job. When the Federal Government began financing her enterprise in 1977 she found work for 165 young people within a year.

During the first decade of the Young Australian of the Year award a prominent theme was triumph over adversity, as four of those honoured had overcome disability to excel in various ways. Two made their mark in the sporting arena, including wheelchair athletes Peter Hill and Deahnne McIntyre, while Michael Waldock and Brenden Borellini were an inspiration to the vision and hearing impaired.

Waldock lost his sight as a teenager, but after being given a CB radio for his sixteenth birthday he began working for the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard. He monitored radio signals seven days a week and contributed to
160 sea rescues in thirty months. Brenden Borellini overcame a double disability and was the first deaf and blind student in Australia to be integrated into the standard high school system. Interestingly, another early Young Australian award went to Marty Gauvin, a computer expert and entrepreneur, who developed commercially successful software that was designed to make computers more accessible to the vision impaired.

Although a significant number of Australians of the Year have a background in science, this is less common for the Young Australian of the Year. Astronomer Bryan Gaensler, who was honoured in 1999, believes this is not surprising: "scientists take longer to achieve, especially those working in the medical sciences." Gaensler graduated in Physics from the University of Sydney with a perfect score of 100 per cent. During his subsequent PhD research, he showed that supernova remnants were aligned with the magnetic field of the Milky Way, forming "cosmic compasses." Only two other Young Australians of the Year excelled in science, including palaeontologist Scott Hocknull (2002), and schoolgirl biologist Anna Bown (1994). Similarly, only four winners of the Young Australian of the Year award have been honoured for creative endeavours, including writer Paul Radley (1981), conductor Simone Young (1986), pianist Rebecca Chambers (1996) and filmmaker Khoa Do (2005). This might be indicative of the time it takes to mature as an artist: whereas a sportsperson’s career might be winding up by the age of thirty, an opera singer’s career has hardly begun. Unsurprisingly therefore, twelve out of thirty Young Australians have excelled in a range of sports, including four swimmers, three athletes (two in wheelchairs), and individual achievers in rugby, archery, hockey, tennis and motorcycle racing.

The Young Australian of the Year award has had a far greater emphasis on community service than the Australian of the Year award. The inaugural winner Julie Sochacki was the first many whose volunteer community work or commitment to important social issues was outstanding. Some, like Sochacki, worked in youth orientated programs, including Asian Tsunami survivor Trisha Broadbridge (2006) and Indigenous youth advocate Tania Major (2007). Hugh Evans (2004) focussed on international humanitarian aid, while James Fitzpatrick (2001) applied himself to the challenges of rural health. Nova Peris (1997) was the first Aboriginal Australian to win an Olympic Gold medal as part of the women’s hockey team in 1996. Peris also undertook important community work as a volunteer motivational speaker to improve the self-esteem of children in Western Australia and the Northern Territory. She is one of four Indigenous Australians to be named Young Australian of the Year, joining rugby league captain Mark Ella, Cathy Freeman and Tania Major.
A Life’s Work

In 1981 *The Age* reported that ‘growing old has enabled historian Professor Manning Clark to find greater comfort in the present.’ Clark was 65 when he was named Australian of the Year; he noted that his advancing years had given him ‘a greater understanding of the human spirit in this country.’

71-year-old economist Sir John Crawford succeeded Clark in 1982; he was praised by the Governor General as ‘one of the foremost architects of Australia’s post-war growth.’ The award acknowledged his work as an influential government adviser as early as the mid-1950s, when he had advocated greater trade with Japan. The 1970 Australian of the Year was 74-year-old Cardinal Sir Norman Thomas Gilroy, a veteran of the Gallipoli campaign and the first Australian-born cardinal in the Catholic Church.

In all of these cases, the award acknowledged a life’s work, rather than a specific achievement in the previous year.

The oldest ever Australian of the Year was eighty-year-old conductor and classical music promoter Sir Bernard Heinze. When he was honoured in January 1975 he insisted that he was ‘still unwilling to concede retirement.’ Sir Bernard’s honour clearly conveyed a belief that older Australians have much to offer. Similar views were certainly behind the formation of community organisations like Queensland’s Later Years Ltd, which played an advocacy role for older Australians and introduced a ‘Senior Australian of the Year’ award in 1987. The award recognised those who made a significant contribution to the community during their senior years. Later Years Ltd merged with a similar organisation in New South Wales in 1990 and became National Seniors Australia, which continued to present the award each year in October, honouring such Australians as actress Ruth Cracknell, Australian Rules football legend Ron Barassi, and the former Sydney Lord Mayor and war veteran Sir David Griffin.

The Senior Australian of the Year award initially had no connection with the NADC. When the United Nations declared 1999 the ‘International Year of Older Persons,’ the Minister for Aged Care Bronwyn Bishop approached National Seniors Australia with a plan to increase the prominence of the award. The Department of Health and Ageing took over responsibility for the program and Prime Minister John Howard presented the award to veteran country music star Slim Dusty in October 1999. Bishop arranged for the NADC to administer the program on behalf of the Department of Health and Ageing, but the award continued to be presented in October, with no
discernible link to Australia Day. Three years later the NADC streamlined its awards programs. The council was running three separate awards, as even the Young Australian of the Year was announced earlier in January and had a separate nominations process. The Senior Australian of the Year announcement moved from October to January (skipping 2002 altogether) and joined the other two awards. By integrating the various programs, the NADC increased the prominence of the companion awards by announcing them at the same function as the Australian of the Year. Since then, many remarkable Senior Australians have been honoured on a national stage on Australia Day Eve.

Although the Senior Australian of the Year award often recognises a lifetime’s achievement, there is certainly no implication the winner has ceased to contribute. At 72 years of age and with his 100th album on the way, Slim Dusty was an ideal choice as the first winner of the rejuvenated award in 1999. Two years later the bionic ear pioneer Professor Graeme Clark urged older Australians to keep working past retirement age:

*I don’t think a medico, or a scientist, should really retire. We should help the next (generation) and generation after that. I believe they need our help, they have problems, they need role models and we can retain our position in society by doing that.*

The Senior Australians of the Year are wonderful proof that active citizenship does not cease at retirement age. Bruce Campbell (2003) had been involved in community work for most of his life, but was over seventy when he had the inspiration to name 2002 ‘Australia’s Year of the Outback.’ The initiative received a groundswell of support in its attempt to bridge the divide between urban and rural communities. Several years later, Campbell continues to chair the not-for-profit national organisation ‘Outback Calling.’ Many Senior Australians of the Year have been advocates of better understanding between the generations. For example, childhood studies expert Professor Freda Briggs (2000) called on the Australian community ‘to overcome the growing divide between young and old and recognise the vast amount of volunteer work older Australians performed.’

Former speedway champion and paraplegic Phil Herreen (2007) agrees that Senior Australians have a great deal to offer Australian society: ‘I think that senior Australians play a major role in shaping our community. The old days of turning 65 and playing bowls are gone.’

Phillip Herreen
Many of those named Australian of the Year have subsequently expressed a view that ordinary Australians are equally worthy of praise and recognition. For example, when cricket captain Mark Taylor penned his autobiography in 1999, he was clearly ambivalent about his Australian of the Year award:

Yes, I was extremely honoured and very proud – yet in no way did my naming on 26 January make me the best Australian around, by a long shot. I was just one of an army of Australians who had achieved some excellence in so many varied fields in the previous twelve months. ... I knew there were a lot of people out there who day-in and day-out worked a hell of a lot harder than I did and achieved great things – yet received no publicity. I thought then of the people who work with the disadvantaged, with drug addicts and alcoholics, giving 100 per cent of themselves to make other lives that little bit better. These fine people get virtually nothing in return – little money, no recognition. These are some of the true Australian heroes, and they were much in my mind in those two days.  

Taylor identified a key dilemma that organisers of the Australian of the Year award had faced from the outset. When Sir Norman Martin announced the new award in 1960 he suggested the honour might go to ‘a child who had shown great heroism or a mother who had successfully raised a large family under great difficulties.’ From the beginning, it was recognised that individuals who are worth honouring are not always well known. Nevertheless, Sir Norman’s sentiment did not influence the selection panel, which consistently chose higher profile winners who had achieved something remarkable on a national or international stage.

As the status of the Australian of the Year award grew, it became more common for critics to call for lesser-known winners whose achievements were not otherwise recognised. This was particularly true in the 1980s when there was a perceived shift towards celebrity recipients of the award. For many Australians, a hitherto unrecognised local figure was more worthy of their praise. This was certainly the view of the students of St Bernardine’s School in Browns Plains, Queensland, who nominated policeman Robert Achurch for the 1987 award. ‘Constable Bob’ had been spending time at the school through the ‘Adopt-a-Cop’ scheme. In a letter of commendation, the students wrote:
We, the younger community of St Bernardine’s, have a strong opinion on the past nominees for Australian of the Year. We find they have all been of a high status or famous throughout the nation. Therefore we have chosen our “Adopted Cop” Constable Robert Achurch who has shown us through example how to be a good Australian and a good policeman.

The NADC was certainly not dismissive of the common view in Australian communities that contributions at a local level deserved recognition. In 1981 it had introduced the Citizen of the Year and Young Citizen of the Year awards, which became a feature of Australia Day celebrations around the nation. These awards were specifically designed to recognise outstanding efforts in local communities, and by 1986 the NADC had signed up 800 local government authorities to the program.

In 2003, the NADC addressed the issue further by introducing a fourth award category known as the ‘Local Hero Award.’ The new award was part of a shift in thinking at the NADC towards the key goal of promoting good citizenship. Fittingly, the Local Hero award is sponsored by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship; it provides an important national forum for acknowledging those who work for the benefit of their fellow citizens. According to the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans: ‘That’s what being an Australian citizen is all about – giving something back to the community we share.’

The 2004 Local Hero, Donna Carson, was honoured for her work as a volunteer advocate for victims of crime and survivors of domestic violence. Carson herself was a victim of domestic violence, having been set alight by her former partner during an argument. After her long recovery and rehabilitation, she began offering volunteer support for victims as they negotiated the often-threatening court process. Carson had the personal experience necessary to know what victims needed, but her background in education also meant she was able to communicate these needs to the relevant authorities. Others to have been named Australia’s Local Hero include: Fire Control Officer Brian Parry, who earned the eternal gratitude of the people of Shoalhaven, NSW, during a 2001 bushfire emergency; Tasmanian environmental campaigner Ben Kearney, who successfully made Coles Bay ‘Australia’s First Plastic Bag Free Town’; and choral conductor Jonathon Welch, whose work with homeless people led to the inspirational ‘Choir of Hard Knocks.’
Choosing the Winners

Unsurprisingly, the process of choosing the Australian of the Year has evolved considerably over half a century, including both the make-up of the selection committee and the system of nominations. In the 1960s Sir Norman Martin usually insisted that the decision of the small Victorian selection committee was unanimous. If this is true, then it is in stark contrast to the selection process in the 1990s, when Phillip Adams recalls that heated debates were common. In 1980 the NADC had formed an independent panel to decide the award, but eventually the selection fell to the NADC board itself. Typically the matter was considered at a special two-day board meeting, which Adams likened to the election of a new Pope: ‘We would go into conclave, there would be lots of hot air, then a puff of smoke.’

The most significant change in the selection procedure has been expansion of the nomination process. In the 1960s and 1970s, the committee usually chose the winner from a relatively small list of nominees; for example, in 1971 Evonne Goolagong edged out only 18 other nominees. At a meeting in 1982, the directors of the NADC and its state based affiliates identified low nominee numbers as a cause for concern. The problem persisted and board members were regularly encouraged to spread the word and encourage nominations. A public relations report commissioned in 1989 recommended greater community involvement in the nominations process: ‘Allow the “ordinary” citizens of Australia a chance to vote for, or in some way have a say in, who should be Australian of the Year.’ During the 1990s glossy brochures calling for nominations were distributed well in advance of the awards deadline.

More recently, the NADC has realised that the nominations process is important not only to the integrity of its various awards, but is also a crucial means of engaging with the Australian community. In 2004 NADC Chair Lisa Curry-Kenny proudly reported that nominations had doubled from the previous year: ‘This is a key indication that increasing numbers of Australians of all walks of life are actively engaging with the awards program.’ Public interest in the awards serves a much broader purpose, as NADC Chief Executive Warren Pearson explains: ‘The awards program is not primarily about choosing four national recipients; it is about engaging with Australians about citizenship.’ The introduction of the Local
Hero award was directed towards this goal, as were various other changes made in 2004. Most importantly, the NADC introduced a new selection process based around state finals. This approach meant a more prominent role for the state-based Australia Day councils and committees, which now oversee the selection of the finalists and host official functions to announce the contenders in November each year. The NADC board now only chooses between the eight state finalists in each category and organises the national announcement in January.

There has also been a significant shift in the criteria for the Australian of the Year award in fifty years. Initially the focus was on awarding the person who had “brought the greatest honour to Australia.” This emphasis on international acclaim was gradually relaxed and Australian-based achievement was recognised more often from the 1970s onwards. The official criteria have usually been suitably broad in their scope, so changes in approach are largely attributable to the membership of the NADC board and the political climate of the time. In the mid-1980s there was a notable shift towards high profile winners, while in the 1990s some of those honoured reflected the prominent political issues of republicanism and reconciliation. Currently, the selection committees refer to three main criteria when considering nominees:

- **Demonstrated excellence in their field**
- **Significant contribution to the Australian community and nation**
- **An inspirational role model for the Australian community**

The third of these criteria supports the NADC’s key goal of encouraging good citizenship.
During the 1960s and 1970s the Australian of the Year award was presented at Melbourne’s Australia Day Luncheon, which was held in either the Town Hall or the Royale Ballroom. The winner was usually announced about two weeks earlier at a function that provided an opportunity to promote the upcoming Australia Day celebrations. This event was a public relations exercise that attempted to capture the imagination of the media and the nation, but in 1966 a journalist from The Age did not follow the script, preferring to poke fun at the stage-managed event:

The patriotic tension in the boardroom on the 8th floor of the Australian Natives’ Association building in Elizabeth Street yesterday morning was being stretched to breaking point. From four corners of the room hung Australian flags. At the Head of the long boardroom table sat Sir Norman Martin, chairman of the Australia Day Council. ...

There had been intense speculation earlier as to what the “special uniformed messenger” would be wearing when he arrived bearing a sealed envelope containing the Australian of the Year decision. ... He was made to walk from the lift door to Sir Norman twice to satisfy other television cameramen, until, rather thankfully, he at last handed the envelope over.

It was somehow an anticlimax when Sir Norman demanded: “Do you bear a message from the Premier?”

“Yes” said the messenger meekly, and as Sir Norman announced the winner to be Robert Helpmann, a shower of prepared press releases announcing the same thing landed gently on the table in front of the waiting pressmen.

Since the 1960s the annual announcement has become progressively more sophisticated. After the NADC took over in 1980 it usually presented the award at an Australia Day concert, which moved around the nation and was often televised. In the 1990s an Australia Day breakfast at Admiralty House in Sydney was the usual venue for the announcement, but more recently the concert has been revived and is held in the national capital.

A highly memorable Australian of the Year function occurred in 1994, when the guest of honour was the His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. The Australian of the Year, environmentalist (and republican) Ian Kiernan, sat on the stage after receiving his award, when a gunshot was heard and an assailant rushed toward Prince Charles. Kiernan jumped to his feet and wrestled the intruder to the ground with the assistance of New South Wales Premier John Fahey. Kiernan later recalled: “the Premier and I lay on the stage, panting as the adrenalin began to flow, and wondering what to do next.” As it turned out, the man was armed only with a toy cap pistol, but the incident was a serious security breach and somewhat upstaged Kiernan’s award.

Since 2004 the award presentation has been held on Australia Day Eve in Canberra. The 32 finalists enjoy an eventful day including morning tea with the Prime Minister at The Lodge, and lunch with the Governor General at Yarralumla. The winners are announced on a specially erected stage in front of Parliament House, witnessed by a crowd of thousands and a national television audience. Specially produced video packages describe the winners in each of the four categories. The scale of the event displays a marked contrast to Sir Norman Martin’s modest press conferences of the 1960s.
Early winners of the Australian of the Year award were simply asked to attend the Australia Day Luncheon in Melbourne and accept their medallion and the congratulations of those assembled. Several of the international winners did not even return to Australia for their award. In more recent years, however, an expectation has grown that the winner will undertake a national tour, during which they will attend public receptions and deliver speeches. As the award became more prominent, many saw the opportunity to promote an issue that was important to them. In 1980 Harry Butler suggested that his award was a sign that Australians had become ‘more than ever aware of their environment and were keen on enjoying the countryside without destroying it.’ In 1985 Lowitja O’Donoghue embarked on a campaign to change the date of Australia Day. It was not until 1987, however, that the NADC began to fund a national Tour of Honour for the award winners. The tour is an important means of promoting the Australian of the Year award, but it also places an expectation on the winner that they will have something worthwhile to say.

In 1987 Dick Smith set himself the challenge of reducing the number of teenage smokers by lobbying the government to regulate tobacco advertising. Smith recalls that he knew something about advertising from his business experience and he could see quite clearly that cigarette advertising was often aimed directly at children. He initially faced an uphill battle in convincing the government to act, but the near prohibition of tobacco advertising in subsequent years appears to have vindicated his stand. Other winners have actively criticised Government policy on important issues: in 1991 Fred Hollows condemned Australia’s involvement in the First Gulf War, suggesting that the human consequences of the conflict were being obscured. He argued that ‘the capital involved in producing one missile could be used to restore the sight of hundreds of thousands of Africans.’ Hollows was succeeded by Peter Hollingworth, who had previously been critical of government policy and had accused Prime Minister Bob Hawke of being ‘out of touch with ordinary people.’ Hollings later recorded that he was pleased to hand over his title to Hollingworth: ‘If the Australian of the Year, with the automatic claim on a certain amount of media attention, can be relied on to be a bit of a stirrer rather than a yes-man (or woman) for the establishment, things might look up.’ Hollings might have been pleased if he had lived to see Young Australian of the Year Bryan Gaensler criticising the Howard Government’s refugee policy in 2001. Gaensler was studying in Boston and was shocked by the way Australia was being portrayed in the international media. He wrote a letter, signed by 150 other Australians studying overseas, which said, ‘we are deeply concerned that Australia’s international standing as an open and tolerant nation has been compromised.’ Gaensler recalls he quite deliberately used his status as a Young Australian of the Year to generate media attention.

The demands placed on the Australian of the Year were difficult for some, who struggled to integrate public appearances with their busy careers. In 1984 Robert de Castella told the press that he was honoured to be named Australian of the Year, but his preparation for the Olympic Marathon was his priority: ‘To an athlete it’s nice to be accepted, but it doesn’t make you run any faster.’ Ian Thorpe faced a similar dilemma when his Young Australian of the Year award coincided with his preparation for the Sydney Olympics. The 2001 Australian of the Year, General Peter Cosgrove, later recalled in his biography that his year in the spotlight was ‘a frenetic balancing act between the...’
wonderful opportunities and obligations of an Australian of the Year and the ongoing and increasing demands of commanding the Army in a time of considerable challenges to our national security.\footnote{27}

In 1994 the dating system for the Australian of the Year award changed and winners were named for the year ahead rather than the year just passed. As a result, there was no ‘1993 Australian of the Year.’ The change reflected the growing assumption that the award was as much about what the winner would do in the year ahead, as what they had achieved to deserve the honour in the first place. In 2003 Professor Fiona Stanley embraced this expectation and planned her year very carefully. She decided to focus on three themes that were relevant to her work: Children, Research and Aboriginal Disparity. Stanley received 650 invitations to speak in eight months. She was unable to accept the majority of them, but when she did she stressed the priority of children’s health and education, the important role of research in informing policy, and the dire need to improve the health of Australia’s Aboriginal communities. Stanley believes that the Australian of the Year award serves an important purpose, and that ‘whoever wins, they should have the ideas to help shape a civil society.’\footnote{28}

When Macfarlane Burnet wrote his autobiography in the 1960s, his Australian of the Year award featured as a short coda to his journey to Sweden for his Nobel Prize, after which he ‘really came down to earth and got back to the bench.’\footnote{29} It is a stark contrast to the experience of the 2008 Australian of the Year, Lee Kernaghan, who put his country music career on hold to tour Australia’s drought affected regions. Kernaghan finished his year by writing a report in which he listed the key issues affecting the rural communities he had visited and the measures he had taken to advocate on their behalf.\footnote{30} For Kernaghan at least, the Australian of the Year award was not simply an honour, but carried with it an obligation to serve the Australian people.
The various medallions and trophies that have been presented to the Australians of the Year over fifty years are, in themselves, an interesting insight into changing understandings of what it means to be Australian. Reflecting his lofty ambitions for the new award, Sir Norman Martin announced a ‘world-wide competition’ to design the inaugural trophy in 1960. Sir Norman hoped to attract entries from the world’s finest artists, but the eventual winner was Victor Greenhalgh, the head of the Arts School at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Greenhalgh designed a bronze medallion, which reflected the prevailing mood as to the importance of Australia Day: its most prominent feature was a likeness of Governor Arthur Phillip, who was described on the medal as ‘The Outstanding Australian of 1788.’ In 1961 The Age reported that Sir Macfarlane Burnet was anxious when a photographer asked him to display the medallion at the awards ceremony: ‘The nervous scientist, whose hand with a pipette would be as steady as a rock, fumbled the medal and dropped it under the table.’

Greenhalgh’s bronze medallion was presented to winners of the Victorian-based Australian of the Year award for two decades. When the NADC assumed responsibility in 1980, it apparently overlooked the issue of a trophy, so Manning Clark received a framed certificate. For the 1986 award to Dick Smith, the NADC commissioned artist Michael Tracey to produce a more appropriate trophy, which the council described in its journal Australia Day Update: ‘The trophy, symbolising achievement, incorporates a figure holding the Australian flag. The figure is made from steel and the lettering is in pewter.’ In the bicentenary year Tracey was asked to cast his trophy in bronze instead of steel. In the early 1990s the NADC commissioned glass sculptor Warren Langley to create a new trophy based on the updated Australia Day logo. NADC Chairman Phillip Adams had been criticised for removing the Australian flag from the logo and replacing it with a hand reaching for a star. After Adams resigned his position in 1996, the NADC asked Langley to produce an alternative trophy, which featured a map of Australia.

Melbourne-based artist Kristin McFarlane designed the current Australian of the Year trophy in 2004. Like Langley, McFarlane works with glass, but she is also trained as a graphic designer; she combines both text and images and sets them in kilned glass to produce striking works of art. The task of designing a new trophy prompted McFarlane
to think more deeply about national identity than she had before: ‘It made me look at Australian identity and think about what was an Australian? Who is the archetypal Australian?’ She quickly realised that an image of one person, or even a group of people, would not work, and that her images needed to be generic. She decided to use a map of Australia: ‘It is one of the oldest continents in the world and it is a very recognisable form for anyone who lives here.’ McFarlane also chose to use the text of the National Anthem, but gave particularly prominence to the lesser-known second verse.

The National Anthem also features in a permanent celebration of past award winners on the south shore of Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra. The Australian of the Year Walk opened in 2006: it features five parallel metal strips set flush with the ground and a series of bollards topped with metal plaques to honour each year’s winners. The musically literate will discern that each bollard represents a note on a musical stave, and that the tune of ‘Advance Australia Fair’ is written along the shore of the lake. Many of the bollards are blank, awaiting the addition of plaques honouring future award winners. The Australian of the Year Walk is symptomatic of major change in the politics of national identity. When the new national anthem was mooted in the 1970s the Victorian Australia Day Council opposed it strongly. The Fraser Government attempted to negotiate the transition to a new anthem, but the Prime Minister told delegates at an Australia Day Forum in 1981, ‘we cannot expect new symbols of our national awareness to take grip overnight.’ The current Australian of the Year trophy and the walk in Canberra are clear evidence that attitudes to the anthem have changed considerably in thirty years.
In December 2007 journalist Mark McKenna visited the Australian of the Year Walk and interpreted it as a highly symbolic form of national memorial. The empty bollards stretching into the distance particularly intrigued McKenna:

These blank plaques – memorials to the future – stand as if waiting for the years to pass before they can be filled in and become whole. Yet strangely they seem more intriguing than the plaques that precede them. It is possible to imagine the line of blank plaques stretching on endlessly, and their emptiness begs the question: What sort of nation will Australia become over the next few decades?

The Australian of the Year Awards represent only one of many ways in which national identity is expressed, but after fifty years they have become a significant part of the ongoing conversation about Australia’s past, present and future. The awards have also attracted the interest of foreigners, including BBC correspondent Nick Bryant, who recently observed that the awards program ‘offers an intriguing perspective on the Australian national character, which is both reinforcing and revelatory.’

The Sydney Morning Herald critic who in 1960 lambasted the ‘all-Victorian’ selection panel for the inaugural award, also offered a more general critique of the proposed honour: ‘It is seldom that one citizen is so obviously raised above his fellow-men as to deserve solemn investment with the title of the most representative or meritorious Australian.’ The journalist correctly forecasted that it would be almost impossible to choose a universally acceptable winner; but perhaps he overlooked the potential of the award to promote productive debate about Australian identity. Critics of the Australian of the Year are inevitably drawn into a national conversation about active citizenship and about what it is that Australians value about individual achievement and effort. There might not be consensus, but the awards encourage a conversation about national identity and the values of a civil society. In this way, the Australian of the Year Awards have inherent value, which is largely independent of the choices made by the selection committee each year.

Nevertheless, an ongoing challenge faced by the NADC is that it is hard to represent the diversity of Australian achievement when there is only one winner per category in each year. The ongoing debates about the numbers of
winners from the sciences, arts and sport are evidence of this. In the future, these debates might revolve around other issues, including gender balance and ethnic diversity. Awards Director Tam Johnston suggests that the value of the awards program is best measured by consulting the complete list of finalists for each year. In its 2005 Annual Report the NADC included a summary of the 111 finalists honoured nationally, which revealed a remarkable variety of achievement and a diversity of personal backgrounds. Importantly, the NADC has recently devoted attention to promoting the state finals, which emphasises the wide variety of achievement that is recognised each year.

Not all of the debate and discussion generated by the awards program has been of a serious nature. A more light-hearted portrait can be found in the award-winning television satire *We Can Be Heroes* (2005), in which actor Chris Lilley plays five obscure nominees for the Australian of the Year award. One reviewer suggested that Lilley’s creation was both a humorous mockumentary and a serious critique of the awards program: “if you want a show that skewers the nation’s pretensions and aspirations, while providing laugh-out-loud comedy, this is the real deal.” All five characters have in one way or another inspired people in their local community, but none of them appears even remotely suitable choice for Australian of the Year. Although primarily a vehicle for Lilley’s comic talent, *We Can Be Heroes* is also a biting critique of what we look for in role models. In contrast, the magazine Eureka Street offers a strong endorsement of the awards program’s potential:

*Critics might suggest that the awards are manipulated by politicians, or point to the fact that a number of former recipients such as Alan Bond subsequently fell from grace. But the fact remains that the naming of role models is an important community-building exercise. It assists young people to set goals for themselves, and encourages older people to take pride in what they have achieved.*

The editors of *Eureka Street* suggest that the awards have been successful in achieving one of the core goals of the National Australia Day Council, which is to ‘promote good citizenship, values and achievement by recognising excellence and service to the communities and the nation.’

Interview with Frank Boddy, 20 February 2009.

Ibid.


Australia Day Council (Victoria), Report of the Executive Committee, 1974-5, La Trobe Library, Melbourne.

Interviews with Frank Boddy, 20 February 2009, and Eugene Petrie, 18 February 2009.

Interview with Frank Boddy, 20 February 2009.