

Reconceptualising public relations in Australia: A historical and social re-analysis

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Abstract

Public relations histories have mostly focussed on activities explicitly described as 'public relations' rather than the practices that characterise this field of public communication. This is problematic because the term 'public relations' was created relatively recently, originating in the US around the turn of the 20th century (1897–1905), and gaining prominence in Australia from the mid-20th century. Furthermore, many do not use the term 'public relations' to describe practices identified under this disciplinary label. More broadly-based studies show that the public communication practices used in public relations have a much longer history than documented in US-centric literature, and that they were in use in Australia well before arrival of American 'public relations' practices with General Douglas MacArthur which is widely cited as the origin of PR in Australia. This article reports historical research and analysis of Australia's national day, now known as Australia Day, which illustrates that practices contemporarily described as public relations were used from soon after white settlement and that they have been fundamental in constructing discourses of nationhood and national identity. Findings of this research call for a reconceptualisation of public relations in historical, political, social and cultural terms.

Introduction

Public relations is estimated to be an \$8 billion a year industry globally (Sorrell, 2008; Wilcox & Cameron, 2010) employing between 2.3 and 4.5 million professionals (Falconi, 2006; Wilcox & Cameron, 2010, p. 3). In Australia, the federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2010) reported that there were 15,300 people employed in public relations in Australia in 2010. This indicates that public relations is a substantial 'creative industry' and an expanding sector of Australia's 'cultural economy'.

However, analysis shows that the documented history of the development and use of public relations is geocentric to North America, has a narrow disciplinary focus, and is culturally, socially, and politically under-stated. This analysis reviews literature on the history of public relations in Australia and reports findings of historical research that identifies public relations practices intricately involved in some of the nation's earliest and most significant social, political, and cultural developments.

Literature review

In her review of public relations literature, Holtzhausen (2007) observed that the documented history of public relations has mostly focussed on activities explicitly described as 'public relations' rather than the underlying objectives and practices of this field of public communication. This is problematic because the term 'public relations' was created relatively recently, originating in the US in the late 19th century and gaining prominence in the 20th century (Broom, 2009, p. 91; Hiebert, 1966, p. 87). A number of studies argue that the communication practices used in public relations date back to the 17th century in the US and

even to the earliest civilisations of Egypt, Iraq, Greece, Rome and China (Broom, 2009; Heath, 2005; Sriramesh, 2004; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009; Wilcox & Cameron, 2010). Furthermore, some contemporary societies and sectors of the industry do not use the term 'public relations' to describe public communication practices identified under this disciplinary label in dominant US models and public relations literature (Sriramesh, 2004; Van Ruler, Verčič, Buetschi & Flodin, 2001). Public relations texts note that practitioners performing roles broadly defined as public relations also operate with titles such as *public affairs*, *corporate communication*, *corporate relations*, and *public information* (Broom, 2009, p. 23; Macnamara, 2005, p. 22–23). Wilcox and Cameron (2010, p. 12) and Johnston, Zawawi and Brand (2009, p. 4) note that some practitioners consciously eschew the title 'public relations' to avoid negative connotations that 'PR' has acquired.

This inconsistency in terminology indicates that an understanding of the practice of public relations based on what is specifically described as 'public relations' is incomplete, and a wider analysis is required. Furthermore, Harlow (1976) has drawn attention to definitional imprecision even within the field of practice named as public relations, identifying 472 definitions of public relations (as cited in Guth & Marsh, 2007, p. 5; Wilcox & Cameron, 2010, p. 5). Definitional imprecision leads to further 'leakage' of activities from those which might be appropriately studied.

Defining public relations

Given "historical dissensus" in defining public relations as noted by Berger (2007) and Harlow (1976), and given a need to explore the field prior to adoption of the title 'public relations', research needs to be framed within a bounded but sufficiently inclusive description of what comprises public relations drawn from the body of knowledge that has been documented (e.g. Heath, 2005; Toth, 2007; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). This can be derived from analyses of the practices, 'strategies'¹ and 'tactics' of public relations identified in scholarly and practice-orientated texts. Commonly cited practices or 'components' of public relations are *media relations* (liaising with journalists and editors); *community relations*; *government relations*; *lobbying* (governmental and grassroots); *investor relations*; *internal relations* (also called employee relations), and *stakeholder relations* directed at other specific stakeholders or 'publics' such as customers, investors, and influential groups (Broom, 2009, pp. 10–22; Guth & Marsh, 2007, pp. 270–296; Wilcox & Cameron, 2010, p. 10). Within the overall disciplinary field of public relations and these areas of practice, the communication strategies, activities, and tactics most commonly identified as comprising public relations are *media publicity*; communicative and promotional *events* such as launches, exhibitions, open days, and public meetings); *speeches* and *presentations*; sponsored *publications* such as newsletters, information brochures, and reports; *films* and *videos*; and informational *Web sites* (Harrison, 2008; Johnston & Zawawi, 2009; Guth & Marsh, 2007, pp. 270–296). These descriptions of public relations practices, strategies, activities, and tactics are used in this analysis to identify public relations practice before and beyond its contemporary nomenclature.

Histories of public relations

A review of historical writing on public relations reveals confining frameworks that have resulted in major gaps in understanding of the role and functions of public relations in Australia. First, most documented histories of public relations have been American (e.g. Cutlip, 1994, 1995; Ewen, 1996; Hiebert, 1966; Marchand, 1998; Miller, 1999; Olasky, 1987; Pearson, 1992; Tedlow, 1979; Tye, 1998.). L'Etang noted in a recent paper on history writing that "US scholars have always tended to assume the activities referred to as PR have been invented by Americans and then exported elsewhere" (2008, p. 328). While some histories of public relations include cursory comments in relation to Greek and Roman rhetoric and

Middle Ages propaganda of the Catholic Church as forerunners of public relations (e.g. L'Etang & Pieczcka, 1996, 2006; Wilcox & Cameron, 2010, p. 40), they mostly confine discussion of PR to 20th century American accounts. These identify local practitioners as key “pioneers” such as Ivy Lee, who set up business in 1905 as a ‘publicity counsellor’ and provider of ‘public information’; George Creel, who headed the Committee on Public Information which spearheaded US propaganda efforts during World War I; and particularly Edward Bernays whose 1923 book *Crystallising Public Opinion* claimed to “set down the broad principles that govern the new profession of public relations counsel” (as cited in Wilcox & Cameron, 2010, p. 52). Although the term ‘public relations’ reportedly first appeared in the 1897 *Yearbook of Railway Literature* (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber & Shin, 2008, p. 66; Campbell, 2004, para. 4)², Bernays is credited with coining the term ‘public relations counsel’ and is widely-cited as the “father of public relations” (Guth & Marsh, 2007, p. 70); Johnston & Zawawi, 2009, p. 49).

In Australia, this US-centric view is uncritically adopted in Zawawi’s (2009) short chapter on the history of public relations in a widely-cited PR text. Zawawi briefly notes the influence of American film industry press agents in the 1920s and 1930s, but she contends that World War II was “the catalyst to allow public relations to develop into a fully fledged profession” (p. 44). Her study concluded that the arrival of General Douglas MacArthur’s 35-member public relations team was the inspiration for Asher Joel and George Freeman to establish themselves as Australia’s first ‘public relations consultants’ that led to the ‘professionalisation’ of public relations in Australia (pp. 32–33). This account has assumed an orthodoxy among historical accounts of the local industry. For example, Quarles and Rowlings state that “the acknowledged origin of public relations practice in Australia and New Zealand was United States General Douglas MacArthur’s visit in 1942” (1993, p. 9). Other accounts such as those in Tymson and Sherman (1987), Stanton and Phillips (1998), and Tymson, P. Lazar and R. Lazar (2008) are characterised by similar brevity, American focus, and post-World War II chronological context.

More recently, Zawawi’s account has attracted questions and some criticism. Sheehan (2007) notes that Zawawi’s discussion of PR in the 1920s and 1930s draws heavily on Collins’ (1987) *Hollywood Down Under*, particularly her reporting on the promotion of American films by *publicity agents*. Sheehan observes that historical accounts of public relations in Australia “tend to agree that public relations existed only in the form of publicity until the 1940s” which restricts their understanding of the past (p. 4). He argues that “this narrow treatment of public relations does not reflect the nature of public relations activity undertaken by Australian social, political and commercial institutions prior to World War II” (p. 5). In a valuable step towards reconceptualising the history of PR in Australia, Sheehan argues that “authors have ignored the earlier Australian development of public relations beyond its publicity function” (p. 4).

Sheehan (2007) also makes the valid criticism that these histories have primarily concentrated on public relations activities carried out by consultants, ignoring those conducted by organisations and governments. In his pioneering Australian public relations scholarly text, *Public Relations Practice in Australia*, Potts (1976) cited cites George Fitzpatrick as the first to practise public relations in Australia – albeit not under that title. Fitzpatrick was listed in the Sydney telephone directory as a registered practitioner in “public persuasion, propaganda, publicity” (p. 335). Although Potts does not specify the date of this listing, the chronological flow of the text indicates that it preceded General Douglas MacArthur’s arrival in 1942. Potts further noted that by 1947 the Sydney Pink Pages listed two “public relations counsellors” – George Fitzpatrick and Asher Joel (p. 336). Sheehan’s own research has focussed on Eric White, the founder of what was to become one of

Australia's largest public relations firms, Eric White Associates, which was later sold to US PR giant Hill and Knowlton (Sheehan, 2009). Industry accounts have similarly focused on oral histories of prominent individuals, mostly consultants (e.g. Morath, 2008; Walker, 1967), along with a few autobiographical accounts (e.g. Tennison, 2008; Miller, 1999). Despite their important contribution, each of these studies neglects the activities of a number of institutional public relations practitioners (Sheehan, 2007, p. 6).

L'Etang (2008) also points out that "much PR history is based on organisational (usually corporate) developments, especially in the USA. Less focus has been given to NGOs [non-government organisations], citizen and activist activities". She notes: "The history of government PR is sometimes sidelined as propaganda. Yet it might be argued that PR history ought to take a ... much broader view" (2008, p. 327).

Citing research by Karlberg (1996), Jelen further notes that public relations research has generally failed to examine "the wider social implications of PR activity" and "its role in contemporary society" (2008, p. 40). In the political realm, studies by Griffen-Foley, (2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2002), Hancock (1999), Mills (1986) and Young (2004, 2007) have provided some important historical insights into public relations in Australia. However, because their primary focus has been elsewhere, these have provided only a glimpse of the social, political, and cultural configurations which are influenced by public relations.

L'Etang says "PR history needs to encompass individual, organisational and societal levels" (2008, p. 321). She further argues that it is important to "research PR activities in cultures other than the USA in culturally specific and grounded ways to correct the scholarly imbalance" (2008, p. 329). L'Etang (2004) identified a number of uniquely British influences and characteristics affecting local public relations practice. Sriramesh (2004) also has criticised the ethnocentric focus of US-orientated literature and called for public relations education and practice to become more multicultural. Sheehan (2007) concluded that "there currently exists no major work on public relations history in an Australian context" (p. 2), and called for research to explore "the existence of public relations before the arrival of the term on Australian shores (p. 3). Media scholar Graeme Turner (2006) has reiterated this claim in *The Media and Communications in Australia* in which he noted that existing studies are incomplete and commented that he and his co-authors have been frustrated at "the sparse documentation of the growth of PR" (p. 235).

Public relations at the margins

Narrow historical understandings are exacerbated by trivialisation and marginalisation of public relations that are commonplace in popular discourses reflected in media and political discussion. In one popular discourse, public relations is conceived as frivolous, involving activities such as "handing out hats at the cricket" or "sorting out the A list from the B list" for social events (Morath, 2008, pp. 5–11). Public relations is also accused of staging 'pseudoevents' and 'publicity stunts' (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006, p. 48). When these perspectives exist, public relations is seen as trivial, superficial and harmless, and therefore undeserving of serious study. More serious critical discourse pejoratively refers to public relations as 'spin' (e.g. Burton, 2007; Ewen, 1996; Tye, 2002), involving hype and hyperbole in its most mundane form, and the obstruction or obfuscation of truth at a more insidious level (Jeffers, 1977). A detailed discussion of 'spin' can be found in Andrews (2006). In this pejorative perspective, public relations is to be avoided and not given legitimisation and is thus relegated to the margins of social, political and cultural history, resulting in a blind spot in relation to public relations in much social, political, and cultural literature.

However, Taylor (2000) argues that public communication campaigns are a “resource for nation building”, pointing out that governments have used public communication “to achieve national goals” and that public relations has played “important roles in the nation-building process of many developing nations” (p. 180). In a detailed review of the use of public relations in nation-building, Taylor and Kent (2006) conclude that “all nation building campaigns include large communication components that are essentially public relations campaigns” (p. 347). In their examination of international public relations, Curtin and Gaither (2007, p. 9) also identify “nation building” as one of the major roles of public relations and point to numerous examples of the use of public relations for this purpose in Africa, former Soviet states, and Asian countries such as East Timor. L’Etang similarly states that “in many countries PR evolved as part of nation-building and national identity processes” (2008, p. 32). Such claims suggest a different origin and a far broader and more substantial role than commonly attributed to public relations which warrants further investigation.

From a review of literature, it can be concluded that the history of public relations in Australia is narrow and deficient in a number of respects. PR history needs to be expanded in five ways: (1) beyond dominant US histories; (2) beyond adoption of the term ‘public relations’ to include alternative descriptions and constituent practices; (3) beyond narrow conceptions of PR as publicity; (4) beyond focus on PR consultancies and individuals to include institutional and government public communication; and (5) beyond industry and media perspectives to explore its wider social, political and cultural embeddedness.

The research reported here was undertaken to pursue two open-ended research questions. First, it sought to build on Sheehan’s recent work and further explore public relations in Australia before the commonly cited historical events of General MacArthur’s arrival in 1942 and establishment of the first ‘public relations’ firms circa 1946. Second, it set out to explore the social, political and cultural significance of public relations in Australian society. This article specifically reports historical research and social analysis of the development of Australia’s national day, now known as Australia Day, and examines the public communication practices deployed in its promotion of nationhood and national identity.

Methodology

This research used a case study methodology selected and analysed within the naturalistic or interpretative approach. The case was purposively selected to inform the conceptual question, as is appropriate to qualitative research (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29). Australia Day is one of the nation’s most significant expressions of nationhood and national identity and a focal point for extensive public communication and interaction. As such, it provides an *instrumental* case study, affording insights into a subject of study and contributing to theory-building (Stake, 1994, pp. 236–247).

Data was collected using archival research and interviews (oral history) conducted by a trained historian and analysis was undertaken by a public communication scholar who is also an experienced public relations practitioner, which established face validity and credibility for the study. Archival materials were accessed in the collections of the National Archives of Australia, National Library of Australia, State Records of NSW, and the State Library of NSW, as well as records of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, and private records of PR history collected by Esther Morrish and donated to the University of Technology Sydney Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Public Communication Program³. In-depth interviews were conducted with John Trevillian, Director General of the Office of Protocol and Special Events in the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet and CEO of the Australia Day Council of NSW, and Katie Melrose, Director, Communication and Corporate Strategy of the

Australia Day Council of NSW. Trevillian is one of the longest-serving Australia Day committee member nationally, involved for over 20 years. Melrose has worked with the Australia Day Council for more than a decade and has been involved in collecting and centralising records of Australia Day with the State Records Office of NSW. In addition, transcripts of recorded interviews with the late Sir Asher Joel were reviewed, and literature review included examination of books and articles about the history of Australia Day.

Findings – Constructing nationhood and national identity with PR

While many scholars have examined the significance of Australia Day in constructing Australian nationhood and national identity, little attention has been paid to how Australia Day itself has been constructed and maintained as a national day. As Kent and Taylor (2006) note, the use of public communication for nation building and promoting national identity often falls between the cracks in scholarship, examined mostly within political science where it is narrowly confined to *political communication*⁴, and not in more broad-based communication research (pp. 343–344). In the only detailed analysis of Australia Day, historian Ken Inglis (1967) noted the presence of public relations initiatives, although he did not explore them in greater depth. This research took up where Inglis left off, exploring and reporting some of the specific public communication activities that have been deployed since the first movement for a national day.

Australia Day commemorates establishment of the first British settlement at Port Jackson in NSW on 26 January 1788. In the early years of white settlement, the anniversary of this date was mostly commemorated with informal celebrations. For instance, historian Manning Clark (1981) has noted that in 1808 this anniversary was observed with “drinking and merriment”. The first official celebrations were held in 1818 when 26 January was proclaimed a public holiday and festivities included a 30-gun salute fired from a battery at Dawes Point (Kwan, 2007) and an official dinner at Government House, followed by a ball hosted by the Governor’s wife Mrs Macquarie (“Australia Day history”, 2010). Little is known about the organisers of these events. It is most likely that they were arranged by volunteers and the staff of government officials, and attendance was restricted to the colony’s elite.

However, this began to change in 1838 when major public celebrations were organised to mark the Jubilee of European settlement and the date was promoted as a “day for everyone” (“Australia Day history”, 2010). Official celebrations included sporting and cultural events and in Sydney crowds lined the harbour foreshores enjoying a day of entertainment which culminated in evening fireworks.

Despite growing interest in celebrating ‘Anniversary Day’ or ‘Foundation Day’, as it had become known, the date was not universally commemorated. Colonies other than NSW celebrated the dates of their own founding. Nevertheless, there were stirrings of nationalist sentiment across the Australian colonies. These were harnessed in 1888 when major public communication and promotional activities were undertaken to mark the centenary of European settlement. Centenary commemorations included public ceremonies, parades, exhibitions, sporting events, special church services, and public entertainment events. Also, information leaflets, posters, and mementos, as well as media publicity were used to promote the anniversary in NSW and the other colonies.

At this time, public communication in relation to a national day also began to include persuasive campaigning by organised groups calling for federation of the colonies as a nation and the creation of a single national day. One such group was the Australian Natives’ Association (ANA). Established in Victoria in 1871 as a mutual society for native-born

'Australians', the ANA called for all Australian colonialists to celebrate 26 January as their national day ("Australia Day history", 2010, paras 20–21). The organisation's promotional efforts initially resulted in 26 January being labelled 'ANA Day' in Victoria from the 1880s through to the 1910s.

The ANA persisted with its campaign to make 26 January Australia's national day, and from 1918 it advocated use of the name 'Australia Day' rather than commonly used alternatives. This campaign was perhaps inspired by a short-lived 'Australia Day' declared on 30 July 1915 as a government propaganda initiative to raise funds for the war effort (Kwan, 2007). In 1930, the ANA formally called for 26 January to be declared Australia Day nationally and actively campaigned in support of its policy. The name Australia Day was subsequently adopted nationally in 1935, although it was celebrated as a long weekend closest to the date in most States until 1994 when all states and territories agreed to celebrate Australia Day on 26 January.

While the event organisers, speech writers, authors of promotional literature, media publicists, and activist organisations engaged in these public campaigns and celebrations did not refer to themselves or their activities as public relations, the practices of public relations were clearly in existence. And it is clear that public relations practices in the late 19th and early 20th centuries involved more than media publicity. In addition to the use of public events, information literature, posters, and other public communication materials, the ANA also can be seen as an activist organisation engaged in persuasive public communication activities and lobbying which are today identified as strategies and tactics of public relations. Further evidence of public relations practices other than publicity being in use around this time can be found in records of the promotion of immigration, an issue closely related to Australian identity and nationhood. Smythe (1998) reports that "probably the first government film-making in the world occurred in Australia in 1899" when the Queensland Government produced a film promoting immigration. By 1911, Australia House in London had a full-time 'Publicity Officer', H. C. Smart, who urged the Commonwealth to produce promotional films to show to UK citizens (Smythe, 1998).

In his reflections on public relations in Australia, veteran practitioner Noel Turnbull (2007, 2010) notes that Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes appointed the first government 'press officer' in 1918, another term that is largely synonymous with publicity or public relations officer. While this role involved writing for and liaising with media – i.e. publicity in a specific sense – it also included speech writing and involvement in events such as public meetings and launches.

Turnbull also reported that in the 1920s the Australian Dried Fruits Board embarked on a promotion through the Empire Marketing Board established by the UK government in London in 1924 to persuade UK consumers to buy more Empire foodstuffs. Gervas Huxley, the Board's first "PR head" (in Turnbull's terms), said in his memoir *Both Hands* that "no British Government in peacetime had ever embarked on so large a publicity campaign" (as cited in Turnbull, 2007, p. 118; Turnbull, 2010, p. 15). The campaign included exhibitions, posters, and leaflets from authors such as John Buchan. Again it is clear that the term 'publicity' was being used broadly to denote a range of promotional activities that are today referred to as public relations.

Public relations was also being carried out in the 1920s and 1930s in Australia by the Victorian Railways Betterment and Publicity Board which later changed its name to the Victorian Railways Public Relations and Betterment Board, reflecting this evolution in nomenclature. An example of sophisticated public relations well before World War II and the

arrival of Douglas MacArthur was an extensive campaign in 1937 by the Victorian Railways Betterment and Publicity/Public Relations Board to launch and promote Australia's 'first modern train', the Spirit of Progress. As well as media publicity, the campaign included a State-wide tour of regional centres where 56,000 people attended public events to inspect the train (Harrigan, 1962, p. 109).

The Sesquicentennial celebration of 150 years of European settlement in 1938 was a major affair and was significant in the context of this study for several reasons. As well as the traditional regatta and other sporting and cultural events, the sesquicentennial celebrations in Sydney included a procession through the city's streets entitled the 'March of Progress'. Staged a few days later, the third British Empire Games were also a part of the celebrations. Also, a number of unofficial Australia Day events were staged including public protests by Aboriginal groups which declared 26 January a 'Day of Mourning' to draw attention to the "mistreatment of Aborigines" (Kwan, 2007, para. 29). Aboriginal opposition to 26 January being celebrated as a national day emerged as a major issue that later called for *issue management* – a recognised function of contemporary public relations. A further significant aspect of the 1938 Sesquicentennial is that, for the first time, 'public relations' was an officially recognised element of the planning and management of Australia Day.

Asher Joel was appointed 'publicity officer' by the NSW government in 1937 to help promote the coronation of King George VI and the sesquicentenary working with the 150th Anniversary Celebrations Committee. Although historical accounts of Australian PR highlight the establishment of Joel's public relations consultancy firm in 1946 (PRIA, 2010b), his 1937 move from journalism⁵ into public relations has been largely ignored. During World War II, Joel served in the military as a staff officer in New Guinea and then as a public relations officer with the Commander of the US Seventh Fleet in the South West Pacific, before joining the Australian PR staff of General Douglas MacArthur in 1944–45.

Joel's involvement in Australia Day illustrates the increasing relationship between public relations and Australia's national day. One of the pioneers of public relations in Australia, Joel would go on to become one of its most prominent practitioners, jointly founding the Public Relations Institute of Australia in 1949 (PRIA, 2010). As well as being actively involved in the promotion of many other major national events, his association with Australia Day continued until the 1980s when he was a board member of the National Australia Day Council that was responsible for the organisation of the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations. The work of Asher Joel demonstrates a significant strategic involvement of public relations in this key construction site of nationhood and national identity.

Public support for Australia Day remained ambivalent even after it was formally established as the national day, a challenge that was again addressed with public relations. In *The Unknown Nation*, Curran and Ward (2010) observe that Australia Day in the 1960s had struggled to be a "spontaneous expression by the people rather than a highly organised demonstration" which was the hope of successive governments (p. 203). For them, the development of Australia's national day was a "festival in search of a meaning" where public support was lacking on account of the "superficiality of the occasion and the meaningless of its symbolism" (Curran & Ward, 2010, p. 199). Links to British imperialism were seen as inappropriate in a nation rapidly becoming multicultural and increasingly aware of its responsibilities to its indigenous population. In 1970, protests were organised in response to the re-enactment of the landing by Captain James Cook (Curran & Ward, 2010, p. 208) and continued throughout the decade. Australia Day was labelled 'Invasion Day' and public support waned. Curran and Ward observe that, by the end of the 1970s, Australia Day had become a "shambles" and a "farce" (pp. 210, 221).

Such challenges saw governments again turn to public relations in creating and propagating conceptualisations of nationhood and national identity. A national Australia Day Committee (later changed to Council) was established in 1979 and Australia Day councils or committees were subsequently formed in each state. Also, from the 1980s onwards, Australia Day has been promoted using strategic and increasingly professionalised public relations. A major turning point was the Bicentenary celebrations of 1988. Kwan notes:

The Australia Day Committee and the federal government were struggling with what respected Committee member, Sir Asher Joel, termed 'the crisis of identity... of establishing an Australian identity which will unite each and every one of us, surmounting all the borders, imaginary or real, of race, creed or class status' (2007, para. 33).

Now knighted, Joel was instrumental in providing high-level strategic public relations advice and expertise during planning of the Bicentenary. A full analysis of the Bicentenary is beyond the scope of this paper, but provides further evidence of the intrinsic role of public relations. Joel's legacy is discernible in the fact that the Australia Day Council of NSW has consistently engaged public relations agencies over the past two decades, as well as employing several full-time public relations specialists within the Office of the Premier and Cabinet to work with the Australia Day Council of NSW in promoting Australia Day.

Australia Day continues to provide an ideal site to examine public relations practice as its public communication campaigns are not supported to any significant extent by advertising. Director, Communication and Corporate Strategy of the Australia Day Council of NSW working within the NSW Premier's department, Katie Melrose, says Australia Day has never had significant budget and "still doesn't to this day". The organising council receives some in-kind advertising (free space) from supportive media, but does not conduct a paid media advertising campaign. In an interview, Melrose said: "we realised a while ago, given that we were lacking in budget to go out there and do blockbuster advertising campaigns, that we are really driven by PR" (personal communication, May 31, 2009).

Director General of the Office of Protocol and Special Events in the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet and CEO of the Australia Day Council of NSW, John Trevillian supports this claim. Australia Day celebrations are organised through an extensive network of local committees and community groups, to which Trevillian pays tribute. However, Australia Day Councils develop themes to be promoted, strategies, and messaging which are 'rolled out' to the network of local celebration organisers. Trevillian openly acknowledges that it is the communication specialists who develop these themes and strategies. He said: "With all respect to our Board, strategy has come from our officers", specifically identifying Melrose as a key Australia Day strategist and promoter during the past decade. Melrose, along with her predecessors and her team are identified as having played a key role over the past decade in 'repositioning' Australia Day away from its imperial origins and negative associations with 'invasion' and dispossession of Aboriginal people, to an "inclusive" celebration of Australian identity and culture (Trevillian, personal communication, May 31, 2009). Such framing and reframing were part of *issues management* undertaken by Australia Day public relations practitioners during the late 1980s and 1990s. In addition to its internal PR resources, Australia Day draws on the voluntary services of a substantial number of 'friends of Australia Day' whose ranks include a strategically assembled cadre of communication and public relations specialists. Trevillian said: "Since 1988 [the Bicentenary], we have developed a team of 35-50 marketing and communication people who give time and effort to supporting Australia Day" (personal communication, May 31, 2009). The structure of the Australia Day Council in NSW today further illustrates the continuing

deep involvement of public relations in its operations with five of its members being public relations or media professionals.

Conclusions

Analysis of the history of Australia Day reveals that Australia's national day was not an organic, spontaneous or straightforward social development, but the result of an active orchestrated campaign involving a range of public communication strategies, activities and tactics that fit within established descriptions of the practice of public relations. These include public events, public meetings, speeches, promotional literature, promotional films, and media publicity. In contemporary times, Australia Day has deployed sophisticated public relations practices such as 'issues management' of contentious and controversial issues such as criticisms of 26 January as 'Invasion Day'. Furthermore, the use of public relations to build nationhood and national identity in Australia is evident in the appointment of one of Australia's first and most prominent public relations practitioners, Asher Joel, as a 'publicity officer' to promote nationalistic celebrations as early as 1937-38, and later as a board member of the National Australia Day Committee. Sustained ongoing use of public relations in creating nationhood and national identity is further evidenced by the engagement of public relations consultancy firms and media and communication research firms by major Australia Day councils, and the appointment of media, communication and public relations professionals to the board of Australia Day councils such as the NSW coordinating body. It is clear that public relations has played and continues to play a central role in Australia Day. It could even be concluded without overstatement that Australia Day *is* a public relations program engaged in building and maintaining relationships and community between groups in Australian society.

Five specific findings in relation to the history of public relations in Australia and its role in Australian society can be drawn from this research as follows:

1. Analysis of the history of Australia Day illustrates that public relations practices were in use in Australia as early as the turn of the 19th century and possibly before – well before arrival of American public relations with General Douglas MacArthur during World War II. While American PR practices no doubt influenced public relations practices in Australia, a chronologically precedent and culturally specific history of public relations can be identified.
2. While the term 'public relations' was not widely used until the late 1930s and 1940s in Australia, alternative descriptions and a number of constituent practices, strategies, and tactics of public relations including public events, persuasive public speaking, promotional literature, and promotional films as well as media publicity were in use in the 19th century and early 20th century. The history of public relations should not be confined to the history of the term 'public relations'.
3. Also, examination of the role, functions and effects of public relations has to look beyond the common narrow conception of PR as *publicity* understood as editorial media coverage. *Publicity* has often been used as a broad term to describe a number of public communication activities that are contemporarily described as public relations, as well as the constituent practice of media publicity.
4. Public relations was pioneered and developed in Australia by government departments and agencies, institutions, and organisations including activist groups, as well as individual consultants and PR firms. Rather than problematic, this is arguably as it should

be, as governments in democratic societies have a responsibility to maintain relations with publics.

5. Despite its pejorative and marginalising description as 'spin' and its association with fakery and puffery, public relations involves a range of substantial public communication and relationship-building practices, strategies and tactics that are fundamentally embedded in society, politics, and culture.

These findings call for a reconceptualisation of public relations in historical, political, social and cultural terms and have significant implications for the teaching of public relations and understanding of the roles and functions of public relations in society, as well as for understandings of Australian politics, history, and culture.

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¹ The term 'strategies' is commonly used in public relations texts to refer to activities undertaken such as media relations, events, Web sites, etc, which are more appropriately described as tactics.

² Other accounts claim the term 'public relations' was used previously. For instance, Newsom, Turk and Kruckeberg (2007) report that some historians credit Thomas Jefferson with first combining the words 'public' and 'relations' into 'public relations' in 1807, while others say the term was coined by lawyer Dorman Eaton in a address to the Yale graduating class of 1882.

³ A number of files, photographs, documents, and tape recordings of interviews were collected by Esther Morrish, Brisbane, Queensland in the late 1990s as part of a voluntary research project for the Public Relations Institute of Australia. In 2004, the records were provided to Associate Professor Gael Walker at the University of Technology Sydney (Public Communication Program) for safekeeping.

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- ⁴ Kent and Taylor (2006, p. 346) point out that, in political science, public communication is viewed instrumentally – i.e. “only as a channel or network” – rather than in a broader sociocultural context.
- ⁵ Sir Asher Joel started his career as a copy boy with the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* in 1926 and progressed to become a respected political reporter.

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Macnamara, J. & Crawford, R. (2010, October). Reconceptualising public relations in Australia: A historical and social re-analysis. Refereed conference paper presented to the Public Relations Institute of Australia National Conference Academic Forum, Darwin.

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