

AUSTRALIANS OF THE YEAR



Australian of the Year, Kay Cottee, speaking at the National Press Club, 20 June 1989

of its investigation into corruption in public life in Queensland. The investigation was ably presided over by Justice Tony Fitzgerald.

In 1972, it was 'time' for Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. In 1973, Patrick White won the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1992, land rights activist Eddie Mabo's 11-year struggle through the courts was rewarded with the Mabo Judgment, which held that the Meriam people's Native title survived the British Crown's annexation of Australia.

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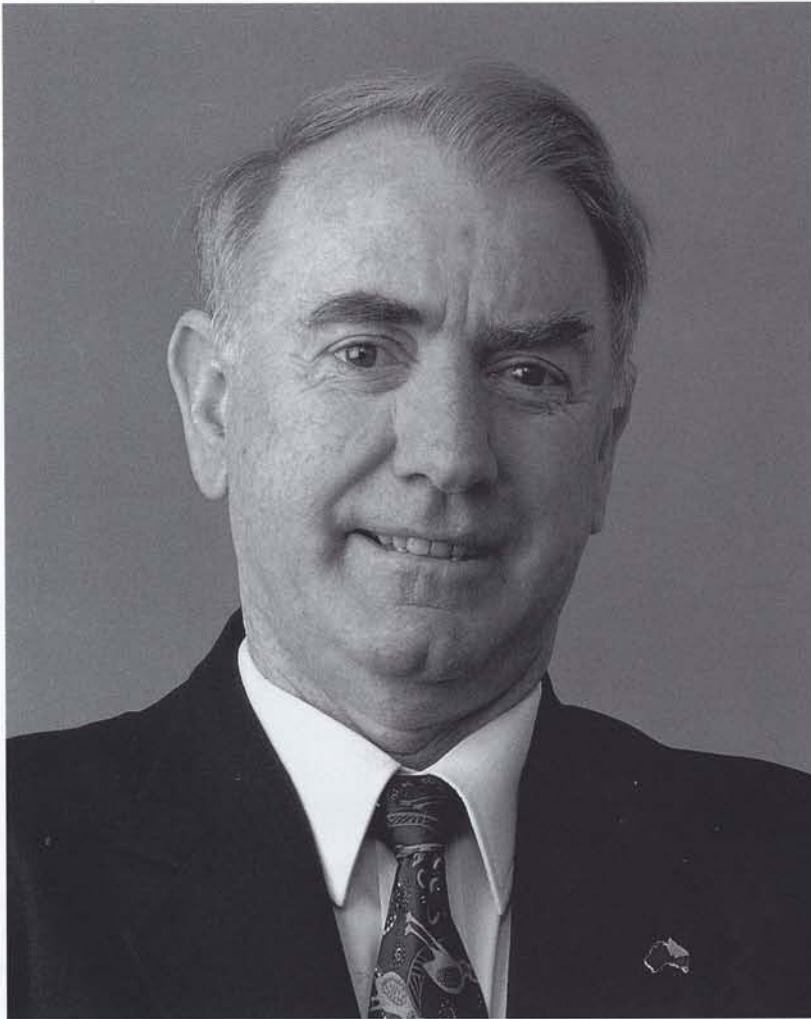
All five have been honoured with the title Australian of the Year. The award was originated by the Australia Day Council in 1960. Its criteria for community nominations set out a clear view of what the council sees as 'key factors' in Australian national identity. Nominees should embody any or all of the following:

a fair go, a concern for the environment, desire for prosperity with a share for all, participation in sport, cultural diversity, the importance of strong community values and support systems and a keen sense that we have our own contribution to make on the world stage.

Since 1960, Australia Day celebrations have included the announcement of the Australian of the Year. Diana Giese discusses the National Library's role in recording the reflections of some of our great achievers

Consider a random selection of dates: 1988, 1972, 1973, 1992. Do any of these bring to mind a particular Australian?

In 1988, the Bicentennial year, Kay Cottee set seven world records, and became the first woman to complete a nonstop, solo and unassisted voyage around the globe. It was in this year, too, that the Fitzgerald Commission, in a blaze of publicity, was at the height



(left) Loui Seselja (1948)
Portrait of Tony Fitzgerald, MLA,
taken at the Constitutional Convention,
Canberra, 2–13 February 1998 1998
photograph; gelatin silver;
25.5 x 20.3 cm
Pictorial Collection (P2080/29)

(below) David Franklin (1934–1994)
Portrait of Dame Joan Sutherland 1989
photograph
Pictorial Collection (P1080/83)
Photograph reproduced courtesy
of Renate D. Franklin

Since 1971, when the *Australian* newspaper asked its readers to name the person with 'the most significant effect on Australian life in the past 12 months', there have been two parallel lists.

The first Australian of the Year, in 1960, was Sir Macfarlane Burnet, whose scientific contributions were in the mechanics of virus replication, and in immunology. His Nobel Prize, awarded in 1960, is the kind of overseas recognition that has tended to precede an award. There have subsequently been few scientists nominated. A notable exception is Sir John Cornforth (1975), whose



Australians of the Year in the National Library

1961, 1989	Joan Sutherland Interviewed by Terry Colhoun (TRC 3499)
1962	Jock Sturrock Interviewed by Daniel Connell (TRC 3236)
1966	Jack Brabham Interviewed by Neil Bennetts (TRC 3251)
1975	John Cornforth Interviewed by Ann Turner (TRC 3288)
1977	Raigh Roe Interviewed by Gail O'Hanlon (TRC 3410)
1979	Harry Butler Interviewed by Stuart Reid (TRC 3497)
1982	Edward Williams Interviewed by Daniel Connell (TRC 3235)
1986	Dick Smith Interviewed by Diana Giese (TRC 3864)
1988	Kay Cottee Interviewed by Diana Giese (TRC 3848)
	Tony Fitzgerald Interviewed by Diana Giese (TRC 3895)
1993	Eva Burrows Interviewed by Alec Bolton (TRC 3432)
1994	Ian Kiernan Interviewed by Diana Giese (TRC 3854)
1995	Arthur Boyd Interviewed by Margaret Chalker (TRC 3390)
1996	John Yu Interviewed by Diana Giese (TRC 3613)

This list includes Australians who received the Australian of the Year award, as well as those who appear in the *Australian's* annual list.

Former Chair of the Australia Day Council, Phillip Adams, disagrees. He prefers to see the award as a 'successful system of provoking debate about the core values of contemporary society'. The award opens up discussion about what it means to be Australian in an 'increasingly complex mosaic of Australian national life'.

On eight long, slow, ruminative tapes, artist Arthur Boyd sketches himself. He tells Margaret Chalker how his warm, close family seemed constantly to be creating something, pots or paintings

The National Library is recording the stories of our Australians of the Year. But what can such a project add to the substantial media coverage the award invariably attracts? The tapes offer insights into how a talent or calling, vision or obsession develops. Formative childhood experiences, mentors, special friendships and influences, and the delight in honing a skill to a high level of achievement are all explored. The tapes allow interviewees to articulate a world view or a philosophy, often at some length. The form varies from interview to interview. Ann Turner's encounter with John Cornforth, who is deaf, was conducted via lip-reading assisted by his wife Rita, another eminent organic chemist, and through pre-submitted written questions.

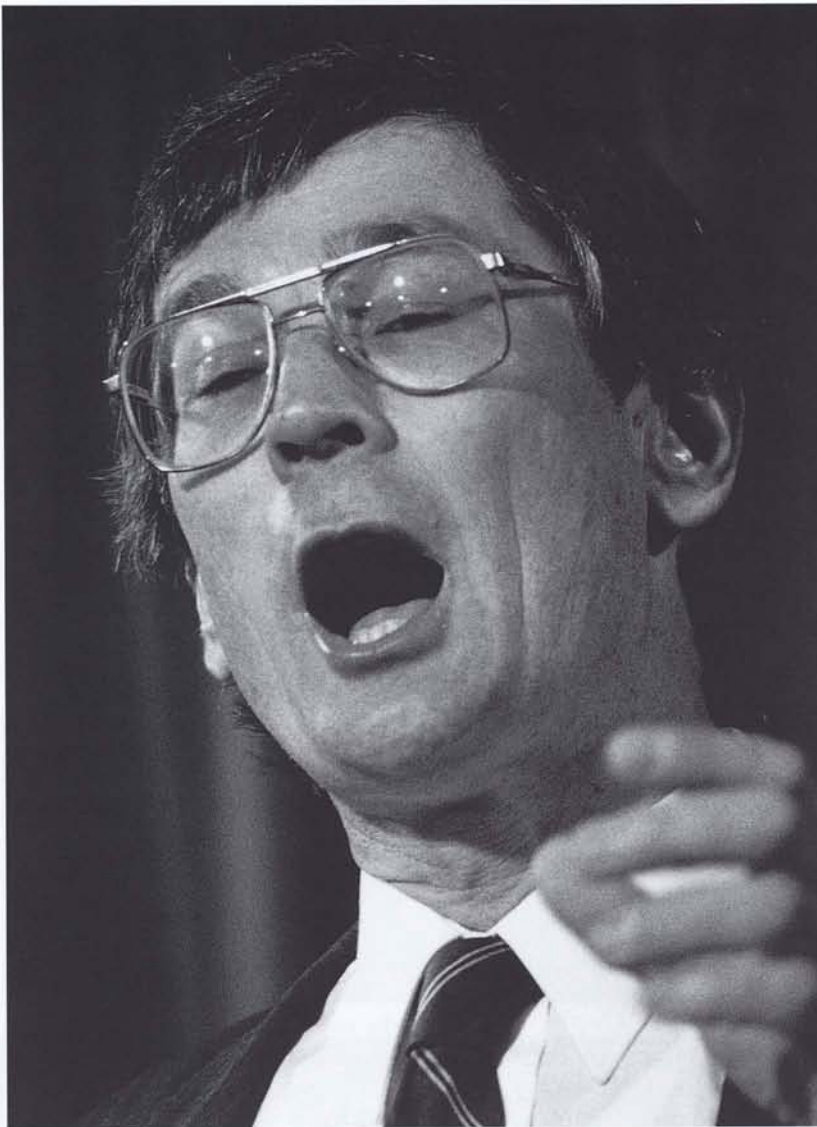
The interviews with sportspeople are interesting for their glimpses behind scenes with which we're all familiar. Sir Jack Brabham was twice world motor racing champion in what some see as the sport's glory days. In 1959, he won the Monaco Grand Prix, the British Grand Prix

1975 Nobel Prize was for the study of enzymes, the protein catalysts of chemical reactions necessary to the life of cells.

Many of those chosen to represent Australia's sense of itself at a particular time have been sportspeople, such as swimmer Dawn Fraser in 1964 and cricket captain Mark Taylor in 1998. Women are more likely to be nominated if they excel in sport. Arthur Boyd (1995) is the only visual artist, and Dame Joan Sutherland (1961 and 1989) one of a thin list of performing artists named Australian of the Year. Politicians such as Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen (1974) and Neville Wran (1978) appear in the *Australian's* list, but not the Australia Day Council's.

The award is announced as part of Australia Day celebrations, which Indigenous and some other Australians view as a celebration of white invasion. As if in response, there have been several Australians of the Year representing indigenous achievements: Lionel Rose (1968), Evonne Goolagong Cawley (1971), brothers Galarrwuy (1978) and Mandawuy (1992) Yunupingu, and Lowitja O'Donoghue (1984).

Critics of the award charge that recipients invariably embody officially-endorsed, prescriptive values. Further, they say, the media promotes its own notions of significance, achievement and identity.



and we went on to win the world championship by ... having to push the car over the line after running out of petrol within sight of the finishing line. I suppose I had to push it probably 50 yards or more.

Amid discussion of the design of cars and circuits, and the evolution of both, he is asked by Neil Bennetts about safety regulations on the tracks. He answers blithely:

Well, they didn't have any in those days ... we raced on a lot of road circuits where there was trees, rock gardens in the middle of the road, even tram lines ... There was just so many obstacles around the circuit you could hit and kill yourself with. I'm amazed that we didn't kill more people.

The distance between the European circuits where he was racing and

Dick Smith, then Chairman of the Civil Aviation Authority, at the National Press Club, 5 September 1990

Repcos, the company in Melbourne that made and serviced his engines, created huge problems. Once, the plane on which an engine had been loaded was held up in Cairo. The passengers were reloaded onto another plane; the freight was returned forthwith to Australia. Another time, an engine was off-loaded onto a tarmac in London and hidden behind a door in the rain. It took three weeks of frantic phoning to find it. Then there were the pistons mistakenly sent to New York. In 1995, Brabham reflected: 'I often think back now and wonder how the hell we actually won the world championship.'

The interviews that tap into the worlds of creative artists could not be

more different from Brabham's brisk appraisals. On eight long, slow, ruminative tapes, artist Arthur Boyd sketches himself. He tells Margaret Chalker how his warm, close family seemed constantly to be creating something, pots or paintings. It was natural that he would want to be part of this. Occasionally, he gives clues to what creates an artist. After 25 or 30, he says

your eye becomes ... used to seeing. When you're young ... everything is fresh and new and young. The tonal accuracy of a young person is far greater. Old men ... just get vulgar—mostly.

Another comment captures the whole texture of a time. In 1958, Boyd and Arthur Streeton were chosen as Australia's artists at the Venice Biennale. Boyd had been producing allegorical paintings such as those of the 'Aboriginal bride'. But representing 1950s Australia internationally apparently required something else: 'Mr Menzies did not like modern art ... Mr Menzies wouldn't have a bar of anything except Australian landscapes.'

In the last of the tapes, a generous spirit is illuminated in his discussion of his gift to the nation of the sweeping expanses of his home at Bundanon, on the Shoalhaven River. Boyd outlines his vision for it as a place 'where people could practise their skills, their capacity as performers or painters'. He and his family have merely been its caretakers: 'Nothing is yours ... it's there to be looked after and nurtured.'

The views of interviewees like naturalist Harry Butler (Australian of the Year in 1979) and Raigh Roe (1977) offer an interesting dialogue on living in and with the Australian countryside. Like Arthur Boyd, Clean Up Australia's Ian Kiernan (1994) told me in our interview that he has a sense of holding the country in trust:

This country fascinates me. Because I don't believe that we fully understand it—ecologically, environmentally. I think our practices have been incredibly heavy-handed and misdirected, because we didn't ever realise how fragile ...

this land is ... I think we've got to get in harmony with this country—because we're not, with our rates of land clearance now. The cotton farmers are really causing huge problems. I know our river systems are in real strife. There are better ways to do things. If you are simply coming in and planting a cotton crop and degrading the land so that eventually after you've recovered all your money and your profit you walk away and leave degraded land, all you've been involved in is a mining operation. People don't have the right to do that.

But what about the economic imperative?

We need progress; we need jobs—but if you're destroying the environment at the same time, we're going to go environmentally bankrupt. If you go environmentally bankrupt, you go out of business as a species.

Every year, Australians turn out in their millions to clean up their beaches, waterways, roadsides and parks. Clean Up Australia has become the largest community event in the country and, through Clean Up the World, globally. In 1998, more than 40 million people were involved in 120 countries. A long-term aim at Clean Up Australia is to repair environmental assets nominated by communities, and restore those to them. At Taronga Park Zoo, faeces from cages were being hosed into the stormwater system, then into Sydney Harbour. Mosman Council had been forced to close the nearest swimming beach. Kiernan took a typically pragmatic approach: 'We didn't want to go and bash Mosman Council ... We wanted to take the cooperative approach.'

They coordinated a venture between an Australian waste water technology company and a Danish one. They brought in the Department of Health, the Environment Protection Authority and Sydney Water:

We brought in pipes suppliers, pumps suppliers. Lend Lease built us tanks and Multiplex built us buildings. And

we designed and built a \$2.2 million waste water treatment plant that cleaned the effluent to such a high standard, it was cleaner than the tap water, essentially.

By way of a ring main, the Zoo's recycled waste water is used to water the gardens, fill the moats and flush the toilets. As well as saving \$50 000 a year in fresh water purchase, 'it underlies the good sense of resource recovery and reuse ... the way of the future'.

Kiernan's big dreams, savvy, abundant energy and huge achievements epitomise the spirit of Australians of the Year. Point for point, he embodies the

Australia Day Council's criteria. As a group, the Library's interviews are building up both the big picture and fine detail of the lives of great Australians who have taken risks and made a difference.

DIANA GIESE interviews for a number of National Library oral history projects, including *Australians of the Year*. A writer and historian, she also organises museum public programs

Ian Kiernan, Australian of the Year, at the National Press Club, 7 June 1994

