

From the Kitchen

27 January 2010



Some years ago, a group of Australian Aborigines celebrated India's Independence Day – 26th January [1]. They thought this much more appropriate than celebrating that day as the date the Aborigines *lost* their independence when the First Fleet landed in Sydney Cove (although some sources say it was 25th January). Indian independence was seen as symbolic – the kicking out of the British.

Symbolism can be as important to Australians as it is to other societies. You only need to look at the number of people in this country who will repeatedly debate whether we should become a republic, whether we should change our flag and whether we should (again) change our national anthem. Some who are opposed to changing the flag argue that this would be a sacrilege to the memory of all those who fought (and died) under it in numerous wars. But my understanding is that Australians did *not* fight only under what is now the Australian national flag (the Blue Ensign) – numerous other Australian and British ensigns were flown [2], as they were at the opening of the new Parliament House in Canberra in 1927. Symbols can be powerful even when the historical data supporting them is confusing or inconsistent. As the saying goes: any excuse will do if you need an excuse.

The arrival of the first eleven British ships bearing convicts, soldiers and hopeful settlers, along with their exotic plants and animals, is probably not an auspicious event on which to base the celebration of nationhood.

There are other examples of questionable symbolism. The one most commonly used by the medical profession – a staff with two intertwining snakes – is said to be the staff of Aesculapius, the 'father' of modern medicine. However, in ancient depictions of him, the staff bears a single twisting snake, not two. Two snakes intertwining or forming a double helix is a more modern notion and could be based on a different ancient symbol: that of Kundalini and the belief in the body's chakras. A curious symbol for a profession of which the majority would poo-poo such a notion.

The symbolic cross of Christianity has its origins in a device used by the Romans to torture and execute people.

The Star of David was adopted by the Jews relatively recently (compared with a 5000⁺-year history). Most sources put it in the Middle Ages. In the twentieth century it also became the symbol for the Zionist movement and the establishment of the State of Israel [3].

The misuse of symbols can also be powerful. The Nazis took an ancient symbol representing goodness and adopted it to represent the supposed superiority of the Aryan race, although it was already in use in Europe for this purpose in the nineteenth century [4]. I wonder whether anyone in Europe at the time correctly read that cynical use of the symbol.

People can be regarded as symbols of integrity, nobility and other virtues. That's what makes such an individual's transgressions so shocking. A political leader who lies; a priest who sexually abuses children; a judge or magistrate who breaks the law; a police officer who steals ...

It is possible for things which initially have no symbolic value outside the group that uses them, to eventually take on a symbolic value to those outsiders. Thus, in countries such as France, people are constrained from wearing certain clothing that identifies them as belonging to a particular ethnic group and school students may not wear jewellery that identifies their religious beliefs or affiliations [5].

So, what days could we celebrate in Australia that would truly symbolise who we are? I could suggest the 27th May, being the date in 1967 when Australians voted overwhelmingly to change the Constitution to recognise Aborigines [6]; or the 18th June, when in 1962 the Federal Government's legislation to give Aborigines the right to vote came into force; maybe the 3rd June, when the High Court in 1992 made its decision in the Marbo case, marking a change in the way Aboriginal land rights are treated. Another date could be the 3rd December, when in 2007 Australia signed the Kyoto treaty (it may not have changed anything materially, but it was a powerful symbolic act, made more so by the long period of refusal to sign). Perhaps we could find a suitable date to celebrate Franklin River Day, to mark the power vested in the people to prevent governments from acting against the will of the majority. We could create many celebratory days that would be much more meaningful to us than India's Independence Day.

PS. The latest news from Metroville (see *From the Kitchen #34*) is that some of the new trains are refusing to stop at some stations, no matter how much their drivers plead with them. The city government has said that it may have to move some of the stations to where the trains *want* to stop, if re-education of the offending trains is unsuccessful. They are also sending drivers off to be trained in assertiveness. Meanwhile, the passengers are being driven to distraction.

1. The 26th January 1930 was declared Indian Independence Day at the 'Lahore session' in 1929, even though true independence did not happen for another twenty years. The Indian Constitution was formally passed on 26th January 1950. [More information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_National_Congress]
2. [More information: www.itsanhonour.gov.au/symbols/otherflag.cfm]
3. [More information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_of_David]
4. 'Aryan' originally denoted Indo-Iranian people and languages and then Indo-European people and languages. Only more recently was it to become more closely associated with Nordic/Germanic people as contrasted with Semitic people. [More information: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swastika>]
5. [See for instance <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3619988.stm>]
6. Up to this time, the Constitution (Section 51(xi)) said: "In reckoning the members of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, Aboriginal natives shall not be counted." More than 90% of voters endorsed the amendments. [More information: www.aec.gov.au/Voting/indigenous_vote/aborigin.htm]