

ON THE DRY SIDE OF BREAD AND CIRCUSES John Hyde
 To divert attention from economic problems State and Federal governments have involved themselves in generating nationalistic fervour over sporting events and diplomatic gamesmanship in Noumea, the Middle East and elsewhere. They will end up destroying the value of national symbols such as the flag or worse giving them wrong and dangerous meanings.

Since the America's Cup challenge rounds started, Perth has sprouted public flag poles. Standing in measured order, even in front of Trades Hall, they remind me of pictures of Nuremberg at the times of Hitler's infamous rallies.

In Canberra, which has long suffered from a surfeit of flags, the new Parliament House (which should have been down by the lake so that the public looked down on it) is to be topped by an enormous flag. Proclaiming what? That Parliament represents the nation? That, at least, is a nice idea, but in fact Parliament is supine under the power of government.

That governmental authority is equivalent to nationhood? That is not a nice idea. Australia remains a great place to call home, but it is great in spite of the legislated favouritism, taxes and bread and circuses we have not yet paid for---in short, in spite of the way governments use the authority entrusted to them.

Is the giant flag to proclaim Australia's might to the world?---the shallow boast of a middle-sized nation with very high inflation, uncompetitive industry and a weak currency which gives its defence forces low priority and whose government wields too much authority at home and is almost unnoticed abroad? Authority at home is legislated whereas abroad it must be earned with the consistency of one's position, and strength of one's economy and, if necessary, by the strength of one's defence forces.

The people who spend our taxes cannot impose, buy or fake a national identity. Identity must be felt by us, the people. Government handouts (the bread of 'bread and circuses') naturally encourage people to stick around but they seldom buy loyalty or effort. Not counting family allowance, more than 2.5 million Australians draw social security. If tariff protection, transport subsidies and other props are counted we all take government handouts.

Circuses---America's Cups, Grand Prix, Test Matches, Grand Slam Tournaments, National Theatre and Broadcasting Commissions---are good fun, not to be deprecated in themselves, but are not national identity. Money taken from unwilling taxpayers ought not be used to build sporting arenas, finance the ABC or stage spectacles such as the America's Cup.

Jingoism may encourage a nation to bully its neighbours but it is worth little in defence. In war, people defend their nations

either because of a deep-seated love of them or because they fear the enemy less than they fear the retribution from their own rulers. (If a retreating Russian is going to be shot at short range behind the lines he might as well be shot at long range from in front.) Australians, who have never needed to fear their government, have produced great volunteer armies. It is because of traditions and mechanisms which guarantee us more tolerance and justice than most countries allow that most Australians rush to Australia's defence.

National symbols should remind us of a loved but vulnerable society which respects liberty and justice. They should remind us of the practices and institutions we must defend with arguments, votes, taxes and, if the worst comes to the worst, arms. If, however, they evoke feelings of authority, racial superiority, or overweening prowess we are not reminded that our free society is vulnerable; rather we are encouraged to adopt a dangerous arrogance, or, if one believes them, an equally dangerous cynicism. Part of the reason Hitler's armies over-ran France in six weeks was that many of the France people did not think their government was worth fighting for. Its symbols were hollow.

Thinking of these different responses in terms of flags: tiny flags in windows, as are sometimes seen in the United States, don't do much to build national unity but they are a sure sign of its existence. Whereas big flags on public flag poles, erected at taxpayers' expense, tell of a government trying to impress its own people of its own importance---probably because its only goal is office. In this context they do not express national unity or build it either.

Dictators of banana republics bedeck the streets with flags and stage military parades, sporting events and theatre and strut on international stages. The General Assembly of the United Nations reverberates with their speeches.

As the later mercenary armies lost the Roman Empire, the Romans, without the benefits of television, became spectators of non-events. They watched mock naval battles in the flooded Colosseum, magnificent horse and chariot races in the Circus maximus, and bloody team sports in both. The citizens of Rome claimed bread from the public dole. Taxes crippled the farming and merchant class. The Senate lost its authority. It took a long time but the beliefs and responsibilities which had once sustained a relatively liberal republican Rome fell from use. There is no prize for finding parallels.

If our government gets the fundamentals of a free and prosperous society right I believe the symbols will pretty much look after themselves. However, next year is the bi-centenary of the occupation of New South Wales, and as there is no way short of going overseas that I can escape sentimental symbolism, I suggest some symbols I think are appropriate. As well as the flag, prominence should be given to the hearth, happy healthy

children, industry and the tools which sustain it, the Parliamentary mace, the scales of justice and slouch hats. The liberal democracy Australians built and defended is our finest achievement; it is most worthy of symbolic recognition.

The task of restoring our dollar to around 100 cents US again will be sufficient test of our national prowess without recourse to expensive circuses. A government which succeeds in that will need nothing more to impress the voters.