

The death of crocodile hunter Steve Irwin and the promotion of an Australian mythology

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The death last month of wildlife adventurer Steve Irwin, aged 44, in a stingray attack off the coast of Port Douglas was a personal tragedy for his family and friends. But for the population at-large it has been transformed into a media and political event of mind-numbing proportions. Day after day, page-one spreads, special tributes and television retrospectives have bombarded the Australian public. Most striking of all, politicians and right-wing commentators have seized upon the crocodile hunter's untimely demise as part of their campaign to promote "Australian values", with critics of Irwin vilified as "urban elites" and "politically correct whingers".

Foremost among those who, within hours, made a headlong rush to publicly mourn Irwin and elevate his image to hero status was Prime Minister John Howard, joined by a chorus of Labor leaders. Queensland Labor Premier Peter Beattie stepped in to offer a state funeral, while Howard opened federal parliament's September 5 sitting with a eulogy. "The crocodile man Steve Irwin was the Australian many of us aspire to be". "He epitomised," said Howard "to so many people around the world what they saw to be uniquely Australian characteristics." Opposition leader Kim Beazley gave praise to "a quintessentially Australian icon", "a great ambassador for this country...and for Aussie values, some of them somewhat larrikin values."

The flags over Sydney Harbour Bridge were flown at half-mast while on-line media outlets promoted calls for office workers to don khaki for a day in Irwin's honour.

A public memorial service, broadcast live from Australia Zoo on the Sunshine Coast to an estimated global audience of 300 million people, was entitled, ludicrously, "He Changed Our World".

How is one to explain this public outpouring? More particularly, what is it about the late Steve Irwin that so attracts the prime minister's attention and has met with a unanimous attempt by media proprietors and editors—from the tabloid press to 'liberal' broadsheets—to promote his image?

Of course, Howard's public grief-act has nothing whatsoever to do with interest in Irwin's various wildlife protection efforts. It is not crocodile research, or conservation of endangered cheetahs, elephants or koalas that motivates the prime minister, but rather definite political considerations bound up with fostering a climate conducive to the prosecution of deeply unpopular policies, from criminal wars of aggression to deepening social inequality.

Steve Irwin died in the midst of a bi-partisan campaign for "Australian values", including vilification of Muslims and the planned introduction of English-language tests and loyalty oaths for all new citizens. Speaking in his Australia Day address on January 26 this year, Howard foreshadowed this campaign calling for "a root and branch renewal of the teaching of history in our schools." "We expect each unique individual who joins our national journey to enrich it with their loyalty and patriotism."

This campaign, the PM explained, had a very clear purpose: "a sense of shared values is our social cement".

The prosecution of militarism abroad and the suppression of democratic rights at home cannot simply be enforced by the brute action of the state. As sociologist Judith Kapferer explained in her 1996 study on the formation of Australian national identity, "the moulding of wills, the manufacturing of consent and embracing of the ideals of others as one's own, can only be achieved through constant ideological suasion. Not beating into submission, but seduction, captivation and enchantment are the most successful devices in effecting the capture of passion and imagination." [1]

It is precisely in this respect that the image of Steve Irwin has been seized upon by the political elite. Under conditions in which Howard has unveiled plans for the largest expansion of the Australian military since Vietnam, and committed Australia lock, stock and barrel to wars of aggression and permanent occupation, from the Middle East to the South Pacific, an ideological campaign aimed at constructing a popular national mythology has commenced in earnest.

In times of fundamental crisis, with society riven by mounting economic and social contradictions, the ruling classes of every nation engage, almost by reflex action, in such patriotic myth-making, seeking to channel the tensions and uncertainty of broad masses behind their own predatory imperialistic appetites. As a statement published last week by the Socialist Equality Party pointed out, such efforts are now underway in Japan, the Netherlands and many other countries.

Irwin contributes to an Australian mythology on many levels. His persona harks back to key nationalist icons: the bushman, the drover, the larrikin, the egalitarian individual who thumbs his nose at authority and who demonstrates his natural abilities in physical exploits, which supposedly negate divisions based on class and wealth.

These nationalist icons were forged during the 1890s as part of attempts by the nascent bourgeoisie to counter the influence of Marxism among the colonies' burgeoning working class populace. From a demographic standpoint, the outback motifs associated with the names of writers Banjo Patterson and Henry Lawson were obsolete in a country that was, even then, among the most highly urbanised in the world. But the purpose of national myths is precisely to conceal social reality. The symbols of Australian national identity cultivated during the late nineteenth century, including those of the larrikin and bushman, were soon wielded against "Asian hordes" and "the hun", used in recruitment posters that sent young men to kill and die in the trenches of World War I.

Irwin is held up repeatedly as "an ordinary bloke", but exactly how many multi-millionaire crocodile wrestlers are there in Australia? The overwhelming majority of working people face growing financial insecurity, with 50 percent of households earning less than \$450 a week. And the closest most ever come to large amphibious reptiles are the enclosures at Taronga Park or Royal Melbourne zoos. But the alleged ordinariness is central to the myth's purpose. As Kim Beazley declared to right-wing shock-jock Alan Jones during a recent interview, "Australian values are about the mainstream".

Nationalist ideology takes shape via the depiction of an external threat, but also through the invocation of an allegedly familiar, unchanging past. Part of this process is the establishment of what Kapferer calls “symbolic types” which, she explains, “do not exist, and have never existed in concrete and pristine ‘reality’”. They appear in myth, like Ned Kelly, or Peter Lalor of Eureka, or Simpson of Gallipoli, and in legend like the Man from Snowy River or The Sentimental Bloke or Ginger Meggs or, more recently Crocodile Dundee...” [2]

If these “symbolic types” flew in the face of demographic and social reality in the 1890s, in 2006 they are positively absurd. National identity is a fiction. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics 23 percent of current residents and citizens were born overseas and one or both parents of a further 26 percent was born in another country. Less than 15 percent of Australians live in areas classified as “remote”, 70 percent live in cities and 80 percent live within 50km of the coast. Those who do live in the outback “are more likely than city people to be in poor health, unemployed, without post-school qualifications, unemployed and in the lowest fifth of incomes.” As statistician David Dale comments, these figures are a far cry from the image of the “sun-bronzed outback pioneer”.

Irwin was an open supporter of the Howard government and the Bush administration’s “war on terror”. In 2003 he was special guest at a \$12 million BBQ held at the Lodge—the Canberra residence of the Australian prime minister—for the visiting US president. Later that year he declared that Howard was “the greatest leader Australia has ever had and the greatest leader in the world”.

Irwin’s TV programs, including the self-styled “Crocodile Hunter” series, “Croc Files” and “Croc Diaries”, along with his 2002 feature-length film *Crocodile Hunter: Collision Course*, do not enlighten so much as mindlessly entertain. His loud, kamikaze-style confrontation with nature’s deadliest creatures was the particular aspect of his persona that sold.

Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of famous ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau, was among the few willing to offer criticism of Irwin’s documentary style. While he mourned the crocodile hunter’s death, Irwin would, said Cousteau “interfere with nature, jump on animals, grab them, hold them, and have this very, very spectacular, dramatic way of presenting things”.

“Of course, it goes very well on television. It sells, it appeals to a lot of people, but I think it’s very misleading.”

This “dramatic way” of presenting issues was often, frankly, stupid. In 2002 he told reporters that “We need to stand proud of what is Australia ... the greatest grazing nation on the face of the Earth! The whole joint is grazing land ... and by crikey we’re good at it! We should be ... [eating] beef and lamb, not kangaroos and crocodiles. They’re why tourists come to Australia. They are tourism icons!” It is difficult to reconcile this statement with any serious approach to environmental issues, although as an ambassador for the tourism industry, he was undoubtedly an asset.

In 2002 Irwin provoked media controversy when, as part of a live performance at Australia Zoo, he held his one month-old son Bob within disconcerting range of a 3.5 metre saltwater crocodile. Irwin was forced by Discovery Channel executives to apologise to fans, but he maintained his son was in no danger.

On ABC television’s “Enough Rope” the following year, Irwin told viewers “I don’t read much”.

Andrew Denton: You don’t read? How come you don’t read?

Steve Irwin: Well, I do read, but, you know, not for 14 hours. You know, surf mags take a good 20 minutes.

It is just such unthinkingness, along with Irwin’s willingness to subject himself to danger, that lends itself to the current requirements of Australia’s political elite. Is it really too much of a stretch to point to the name of Irwin’s conservation fund “Wildlife Warriors”, to the khaki uniform and to the crocodile hunter’s role in fronting the government’s Quarantine Matters campaign as suggestive of points of support for the

broader climate of nationalism and militarism which is being actively stoked?

Speaking on September 5, Howard said that Irwin “believed passionately in a strong, protected Australian environment” and that he had made “a great contribution to the quarantine cause and the clean green protected image that this country wants to continue and represent to the rest of the world.” The words “green” and “environment” are just a threadbare cover for unabashed patriotism and racial politics.

Irwin’s brand of wildlife conservation exerts special appeal to capitalist politicians of all stripes. “Whenever we get enough cash and ... a chunk of land that we are passionate about” Irwin explained in an interview with Andrew Denton in 2003, “bang, we buy it. What we are trying to do is set an example to the world that every single person can make a difference, particularly those in the political arena, those that have zoological facilities, any multinationals, any millionaires, they can all make a difference by buying chunks of land.”

In other words, the preservation of biodiversity and the world’s ecology is not a social question, requiring the combined efforts of scientists and marshalling the ingenuity and labour of the world’s population, rather, the self-made man, a multi-millionaire naturally, is cast as saviour. No wonder that Howard, who along with George W Bush is the only politician in the world to argue against ratification of the Kyoto protocol on global warming, has been so fulsome in his praise for Irwin’s conservation record.

On September 6 an article by expatriate academic Germaine Greer appeared in Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper, igniting furore in the Australian media and political establishment. Irwin, wrote Greer, was “a 21st century version of a lion tamer, with crocodiles instead of lions.” “There was no habitat, no matter how fragile or finely balanced, that Irwin hesitated to barge into, trumpeting his wonder and amazement to the skies... Every creature he brandished at the camera was in distress.” “The animal world,” she concluded, “has finally taken its revenge”.

Within hours her comments had provoked a media feeding frenzy. Queensland Premier Beattie denounced what he described as “extreme radical rubbish” and warned her to “back off”. Opposition foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd told reporters Greer’s remarks were “a bucket load of politically correct pap... she should put a sock in it.” Murdoch’s tabloid *Daily Telegraph* launched a vicious personal attack on the 67-year-old writer, calling on readers to send hate mail to her UK email address and purchasing a dog muzzle which they photographed for the newspaper, before having it couriered to London.

Germaine Greer’s *Guardian* piece, a relatively tame critique of the crocodile hunter’s celebrity persona, was now under siege as something akin to treason. Not only that, her article was itself seized upon to deepen the now long-running campaign against “political correctness” (read independent critical thought).

A particularly foul opinion piece by author John Birmingham published in the *Australian* on September 7—entitled “Expat’s feral attack reflects elitist conceit”—took to this theme with particular glee. The “childless” Greer “would be easy to dismiss as some unwashed and wretched bag lady who had somehow stumbled on to the opinion pages of the *Guardian*,” wrote Birmingham, “were it not for the fact that this feral hag does actually speak for a significant minority.”

The enemy in question was an “inner urban elite” who “found Irwin’s cartoon imagery uncomfortable”.

Who is Birmingham kidding? While much is now being made of Irwin’s popularity in Australia, the reality is somewhat different. He was never able to secure the viewers needed to sustain a slot on local free-to-air television. It is no secret that Steve Irwin’s super-hyped Aussie persona was regarded as something of a put-on. Even among pay-TV subscribers, the numbers tuning into “Crocodile Hunter” were tiny. Figures provided by the Australian Film Commission show that in 2004

only 0.5 percent of all pay-TV watchers tuned into Animal Planet. By comparison, the list of top rating documentaries on free-to-air television in the same year was headed by “Seven Wonders of the Industrial World—the Panama Canal”, watched by 20.7 percent of the viewing public. And while Irwin has previously joked that David Attenborough appeals to a slightly narrower demographic, a documentary entitled “Life on Air: David Attenborough’s 50 years in Television” saw 14.8 percent tuning in the night it was screened.

John Birmingham, it should be mentioned parenthetically, has a long-standing fascination with Australia’s “ocker” (i.e., backward) culture. His 2001 compilation of essays entitled *Off One’s Tits* is, according to the publishers, “an exploration and celebration of the wonderful world of men and the things they hold dear: booze, badness, bachelorhood, boxing, grog, misbehaving, masculinity, alcohol, footy, pork, piss and women.” His most recent book, *Dopeland* “is for anyone who’s ever fired up a choice fatty, wondered whether you can drink the bong water, gone on a Mars Bar run, or just considered watching daytime TV a worthwhile way to spend your twenties.”

By month’s end, right-wing commentators were making clear the political agenda at work. An opinion article by David Chalkie in Melbourne’s *Herald Sun* openly derided “the knockers, the whingers, the Lefties, the chardonnay socialists, with intellectual tickets on themselves” who had “sneered and derided the event and the man”.

The public tribute to Irwin “was about Australian values and how we express them”.

These “values”, according to Chalkie, include: “Decency”, “Honesty”, “Self-Reliance”, “Hard Work”, “Tolerance” and “Family”. Why these values should be specifically Australian, as opposed to say, Canadian or Fijian, was not elaborated, “but” Chalkie asserts, “the way we express them is uniquely Australian”.

Each of Chalkie’s “values” carries with it either the vicious tail-whip of exclusivism or the assertion of cultural norms that conceal the fundamental class divisions wracking Australian society. Opponents of the “true blue” and “dinki di” are, he writes, “affectatious... bludgers”. Transgressors against “Honesty” are refugees trying to “barge in through ‘the back door’”. And “Self Reliance” means that “Contrary to the egalitarian myth, we are great believers in people taking responsibility for their own actions. Those who ‘put in’ and ‘make a go of it’ should reap the rewards of their effort and skill.” All in all, an Australian version of Social Darwinism, justifying on the one hand the concentration of vast amounts of wealth in the hands of a tiny minority, and ‘mutual obligation’ or detention centres for those who can’t, or won’t, ‘fit in’.

The very public mourning for Irwin by Howard, Beazley and the entire corporate-controlled media, and their vilification of even the slightest criticism, is a warning to all working people. A repressive climate, based on fear, intimidation and ignorance, is being established. In its resort to “Australian values” and by its invocation of a national identity, the political establishment aims to weaken and divide the working class and establish a cultural norm conducive to the requirements of the ruling elite, from which only enemies—deemed ‘un-Australian’—will deviate.

Notes:

[1] Kapferer, Judith, *Being All Equal, Identity, Difference and Australian Cultural Practice*, Berg, Oxford, 1996, p. 38.

[2] *ibid*, p. 41.



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