Celebrating the Bicentennial in 1988

The Minister for Administrative Services, Senator Reg Withers, briefed Cabinet on options for a Commonwealth role in celebrating the bicentenary of European settlement in Australia in 1988. The options ranged from doing nothing to adopting a major program with international participation. Withers favoured a major program, seeing the bicentenary as ‘a timely opportunity for development in this multi-cultural society of a sense of belonging, for the crystallization of community thought, for the expression of a national identity and for the further promotion of national unity’. Cabinet agreed in principle to the adoption of a major program and approved initial administrative measures to develop it in consultation with the states (Submission 2127).

Selected document

Submission 2127, Australian Bicentenary 1988
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FOR CABINET

Title
AUSTRALIAN BICENTENARY 1988

Minister
Senator The Rt. Hon. R.G. Withers, Minister for Administrative Services.

Purpose/Issues
To determine the course of action to be taken to celebrate the Bicentenary.

Relation to existing policy

Legislation involved
Yes; title not yet known.

Urgency: Critical/significant dates

Consultation: Ministers/Departments consulted
Is there agreement?

Cost: this fiscal year
- year 2
- year 3

$50,000
$50,000

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Public Presentation - Minister's Proposals

1. (a) When and where is the decision to be announced?
(b) Is a draft press statement attached?
(c) How widely is the announcement to be circulated?

2. (a) Is a press conference considered necessary?
(b) What media opportunities will be taken?

3. What supplementary material is required for backgrounding journalists, Members and special interest groups?

4. (a) What prior consultation with State Governments or other official bodies is required?
(b) Which special interest groups should be advised of the announcement?

5. What general or sectional support can be expected?

6. What criticism is anticipated and how will it be answered?

At the Premier's Conference after agreement in principle is reached.

No

As widely as possible at an appropriate time.

It may be.

All opportunities as necessary.

Details of US Bicentennial arrangements.

See 1 (a)

Historical societies, Constitutional Associations, service groups, (e.g. Rotary, Apex and Lions, etc.)

General support.

Some criticism of costs. The major problem however, will be in relation to the extent of involvement. Many schemes which just cannot receive Commonwealth Government support will be proposed. It will be necessary to ensure only viable propositions are supported.
Submission 2127 cont.

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THE ISSUE


CONSIDERATION OF THE ISSUE

2. The year 1988 marks the 200th anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet and the establishment by Governor Phillip of the First Settlement at Port Jackson. It is an important milestone in the life of the Australian nation.

3. Australia's first 200 years, from the establishment of the initial convict settlement and the subsequent establishment of other settlements and colonies leading to the separate States and the Commonwealth of Australia of today, will embrace a period rich in history and folklore and which has already seen the addition of many peoples and their cultures from many lands.

4. The year 1988 offers a unique opportunity to exploit most advantageously, the full richness of this background and to appeal to the imagination and initiative of the peoples of this country, and indeed of other countries. It provides a timely opportunity for development in this multi-cultural society of a sense of belonging, for the crystallisation of community thought, for the expression of a national identity and for the further promotion of national unity in the establishment of national values and aspirations. These opportunities should readily and naturally attract a politically bipartisan approach.

5. Already there is evidence that, with or without Government support, there will be celebrations of one sort or another.
another in 1988 and people will look increasingly to the Commonwealth to give a lead. This is not to say that this is a matter for the Commonwealth alone - nor indeed for the Commonwealth and/or State Governments alone. There is a need for any celebrations to be designed to involve in some way all individuals and sections of the community at all levels, collectively and individually, and for particular attention to be given to the encouragement of "grass roots" initiatives and activities.

6. The nature and scale of celebrations will be determined to a very large extent by input which Governments might decide upon. The scale of a Commonwealth input, for example, could be from a virtually token recognition of the occasion to varying degrees of substantial activities involving varying amounts up to say hundreds of millions of dollars spent over a number of years. There would, of course, be opportunities for off-setting revenues and other benefits direct and indirect. With proper and timely organisation a large degree of self financing should be possible. The aim must be to keep within reasonable bounds any calls on State and Federal finance.

7. Australians are a scattered people in a vast land and this will pose special problems for those who have the task of bringing the nation together in a "family" celebration. To achieve the best effect, the Commonwealth should in collaboration with the States develop plans for such a celebration in which other countries could be expected also to participate under the aegis of the Bureau of International Expositions. The aim would be to have celebrations in all capital cities and
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extending out to country towns and rural centres so that the whole nation is involved.

OPTIONS

8. Options for the Commonwealth would be:
   
   (a) stand aloof;
   (b) adopt a relatively low-key program;
   (c) adopt a major program of domestic activities but without international participation;
   (d) adopt a major program with international participation.

9. Before any final decision is taken about the precise nature and scale of Commonwealth involvement an assessment of the possibilities which would best suit the Australian situation should be made.

THE PUBLIC IMPACT OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

10. An appropriate public announcement would best be made after consultation with the States.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

11. Minimal funds would be required during this financial year. Expenditures in subsequent years would depend upon the course of action the Government may decide following consultation with the States and further investigations.

COMMONWEALTH, STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT RELATIONS

12. As well as a Prime Minister/Premier approach in the first instance, the development of plans will call for

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continuous consultation and interaction between all levels of government. The matter is suggested as an item for discussion at a Premiers' Conference.

LEGISLATION

13. Legislation will need to be designed in collaboration with the States to effectively control the exploitation of words, things and activities related to the celebrations and to maximize revenue opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that Cabinet:

(a) agree in principle that a major program with international participation be developed to celebrate the Australian Bicentenary 1988;

(b) agree that the Commonwealth initiate collaboratively with the States the development of plans to this end and that the Prime Minister write accordingly to each Premier with the intention that the matter be listed as an item at a Premiers' Conference;

(c) authorise me to arrange for my Department to put in hand preparatory work, namely:

(i) the formulation in consultation with Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Public Service Board, of proposals for initial and longer term organisational
and administrative structures for developmental and operational stages of
the Bicentennial celebrations - including
a (initially part-time) National Bicentennial
Commission (of 3 to 5 members including the
Chairman with a full-time Chief Executive
Officer) to be responsible to the Prime
Minister and the Premiers;

(ii) to develop and bring forward in consultation
with Attorney-General's Department,
legislation effectively to control the
exploitation of words, things and activities
relating to the Bicentenary;

(iii) the development, in consultation with the
task force departments, of a brief for the
Premiers' Conference;

(iv) the preparation, in consultation with the
task force departments, of a brief for
Australia's attendance at the Bureau of
International Expositions in July.

(d) note that my Department will be having in-depth
consultation with experts from overseas countries who
have been closely involved in national celebrations
of a similar kind, e.g. Canada, U.S., Japan.

(R.G. WITHERS)

5 April 1978