

THE MELBOURNE CUP AND TWO-UP:
EGALITARIANISM AND GAMBLING

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In the previous article Wray Vamplew told the story of Barry Andrews' big night at the Moonee Valley Trots. Befitting his training, Wray gave prominence to the economic aspects of the story - but it was not the whole story. That night at Moonee Valley two Sporting Traditions were being followed. It was our third visit to the trots - following the tradition established at the first two Sporting Traditions Conferences. On each of the first two visits, Barry had a bet in every race without having to queue at the payout window - a total of sixteen losing tickets. At Moonee Valley Barry continued his consistent form for the first seven races before breaking with tradition in the last. Significantly his 'collect' marked the last occasion when the sports historians witnessed a race together. The tradition no longer seemed worth preserving.

The retelling of this story and the emphasis on racing and gambling in the first half of the volume might suggest that Barry Andrews was a keen (if unsuccessful) punter - or at least that racing was one of his main sporting passions. Neither suggestion is true. Barry was no gambler or compulsive racecourse patron. His real sporting passions lay elsewhere. Nevertheless, he could recite the complete list of Melbourne Cup winners (and their jockeys). Only Toparoa gave him trouble, perhaps because he had difficulty believing that a horse of such poor quality could win the great race. Barry also had a vast catalogue of stories concerning Thommo's two-up school though I'm willing to bet that he never attended a game.

Barry Andrews was, of course, thrilled by the contests between great horses, the heroic struggles of champions against the work of the race club handicappers and the athleticism, daring and tactics of the top jockeys. He had the true sports-fan's love of sport - all sport. But his fondness for horse-racing (and for two-up) derived not from any passion for

gambling. It came from his recognition of their prominence in Australia's ethos and folklore.

For Australia's historians, the importance of two-up and the Melbourne Cup poses a problem. Why should they occupy such a place in Australian life and the Australian identity? Why have Australians developed such strong feelings towards an annual betting event and an illegal coin game? The answer is both complex and largely self-evident. It lies primarily in the realm of symbolism. Both events symbolize far more of Australia's historical experience than is perhaps readily apparent to most Australians in the 1980s, but if that symbolism is now often unconscious it is no less important. The particular aspect of that symbolism to be dealt with here concerns the nature of the class struggle in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially the nature of the struggle between the classes for dominance over the nation's value systems.

It was during the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century that Australia sought an obviously different national identity to distinguish it from Britain. That search and the essential elements of the accepted national character have been documented sufficiently and require no detailed discussion. Nevertheless it should be emphasised that the accepted national identity was something of a paradox. It was a bush or frontier image in a highly urbanised nation. It was a working-class image or at least one based on egalitarianism, even though Australia was becoming a commercial capitalist nation in which political power and economic decision-making were increasingly both in the hands of and in the interests of an urban middle class. Significantly, both the Melbourne Cup and two-up contain large elements of egalitarianism.¹

This claim might seem a little strange in reference to a horse race, the winners of which are often regarded as champions and are revered by Australians. Carbine who won the Melbourne Cup in 1890 and Phar Lap the 1930 winner, are two deities of Australian sport. They are better known than most sports men and

women. They and many other Cup winners are among the nation's equine elite. Nevertheless the race can be seen as an essentially egalitarian contest.

Much of the Melbourne Cup's appeal lies in the nature of the race. Although traditionally the richest race on the Australian racing calendar, it is a handicap race, open to horses of all ages. It is run over 3200 metres, a distance raced over only infrequently in Australia. Accordingly it differs markedly from the premier races of most other nations, where the Derby or some other set weights classic race, held over the more familiar distances of one and a quarter or one and a half miles holds the position of pre-eminence. Such races are designed to determine the best horse of the year and the racing public expect that the best horse will win. Not so for the Melbourne Cup. In that event, the best horses (on known form) receive severe handicaps in an effort to ensure that all runners have an equal chance. The race distance also has the effect of providing an element of doubt, as most runners have not previously raced over 3200 metres. As a result, the Melbourne Cup is not a race for horse racing purists who wish to see champions win the major race. Of 127 Cups only 18 have been won by outright favourites, but 8 races have been won by horses starting at odds of 40 to 1 or more.

When Just a Dash won the 1981 Cup the champion in the field, Kingston Town, ran last. The following year Kingston Town appeared to have the race won but was run down by the less brilliant Gurner's Lane. Two years earlier the champion horse Dulcify had the race at his mercy, until he broke down in the straight, ending an illustrious career. Such champions must compete against more than the other runners. Their main opponent is the handicapper, whose job is to provide "equality of opportunity" for all the entrants, regardless of their ability. If handicappers do their jobs perfectly all horses should cross the line together in a multiple dead-heat. The Melbourne Cup is a race for gamblers; a race which is based on uncertainty and the concept of equality of opportunity.

Two-up is similarly based on the idea of equality of opportunity. In its traditional form the game involves tossing the pennies into the air, in a way which causes them to spin. When they land they are examined to see whether the "head" side of the penny or the "tail" side is facing upwards. If the "spinner" (who tosses the coins) succeeds in tossing two heads or two tails a result is declared. If one of each appears the spinner is invited to toss again. The simplest form of betting on the event is for the participants to bet with each other on whether the spinner will throw two heads or two tails. The chances of each result are equal and so are the betting odds. The traditional appeal of the game lay in this equality of chance.²

Two-up is a game which suited the taste of Australian working-class gamblers because of the rapid turnover of results, the possibility of frequent, if small, payouts based on true odds, and the possibility of a big "jackpot" win for the spinner. More than anything, however, it was the fairness of the traditional two-up game which gave it its appeal. Almost as important was the game's illegality. It provided an opportunity for the gamblers to "thumb their noses" at the nation's legislators and their expressions of a morality which saw gambling as a vice and an economically unproductive exercise. Rebellion against the imposition of middle-class values is a fundamental aspect of Australia's veneration of gambling, but if we are to understand its importance we need to examine the nature of class interaction over the gambling question in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Australia.

Australia was first occupied by Europeans at the end of Britain's pre-industrial era and for at least its first six decades as an outpost of European civilization its occupants attempted to re-create a pre-industrial British society in the new world. Part of that re-creation can be seen in its attitudes towards gambling. In colonial Australia gaming and betting were frowned upon only when they were likely to produce public disorder, so all the major forms of gaming and betting were introduced into the new colonies and quickly found legitimacy. Some forms, most notably horse racing, were actively encouraged

by colonial governors as visible signs of the sophistication of colonial civilization.³

In this new society, composed overwhelmingly of a colonial gentry which imitated the behaviour of Britain's rural aristocracy and a convict and ex-convict class, which can be seen as an embryonic working class, the major class groups co-operated in their gambling endeavours. Typically the gentry provided the opportunity to gamble, through their establishment of race clubs, their ownership of fighting cocks and the provision of other facilities. For their part, the working class provided support in numbers and added to the viability of the occasions by paying entrance or admission fees to the racecourses.⁴

Horse racing developed quickly in all Australian colonies, as did the provision of gaming facilities, though these were likely to be segregated, with the gentry playing their card and dice games in their clubs, and other pursuing their games in the less comfortable surroundings of the public houses. For the Australian colonial gentry, like their counterparts in Britain or in Virginia, gambling was a matter of honour and of conspicuous consumption. Winning or losing was less important than being seen to be able to risk large sums of money on matters of chance.³

For the less wealthy gamblers, gaming and betting provided one of the few opportunities for them to change their station in life. This was particularly relevant in a new society where even a small windfall could place the successful gambler on the path to success. As was the case for the industrial working classes of Britain, the Australian 'workers' had no real concept of saving, except perhaps for their funeral or wake, and so they were not inclined to put away money for "a rainy day". Their culture was one which saw greater value in risking any superfluous funds in pursuit of immediate gains.⁶

By the 1880s, a century after the initial European settlement, a number of entrepreneurial initiatives were providing the working classes with increasing opportunities to risk their capital in pursuit of riches. The most prominent of these concerned sweepstakes consultations held on the major races and the

invention of the pari-mutual totalisator. The totalisator was simply a means of calculating and displaying the odds payable on races according to the pari-mutual system of betting, where instead of taking fixed odds about a horse's chances, from a bookmaker, all bets were placed into a pool which was then divided between the successful investors according to the number of units they invested on the winning horse.⁷

Even allowing for a fixed percentage deducted from the pool by the totalisator proprietor, the bettors believed that betting against each other in this fashion was a fairer form of betting than by negotiating odds with a bookmaker. This attitude applied particularly to betting with bookmakers away from the racecourse. 'Backyard totes' had become such a threat to the economic viability of the racecourses that they were banned in all colonies in the 1880s. Such bans however were seldom very successful as the backyard tote operators did not charge admission fees which cut heavily into the working classes' betting banks. In this era, betting on horse racing was apparently less confined to the racecourse than ever. Betting shops or tote shops sprang up in the back streets of the cities and in the suburbs. The policy complained that their powers were inadequate to combat the shops, which were most prominent in working-class communities.

The sweepstakes consultations also presented an image of fairness but they provided an additional attraction for working-class gamblers. The sweepstake was in essence a lottery in which a large number of tickets were sold. For a small investment the purchaser had the opportunity to win a large sum of money. Prizes were determined by a two-step process. Initially a set of winning ticket numbers were drawn (usually in public, with the press in attendance) and these were allocated not monetary prizes but the names of the horses due to contest an upcoming feature race. The value of the prizes eventually awarded to the winning ticket holders was determined by the placing run subsequently by the horses allocated to those tickets. Such sweepstakes consultations were run, by a number of entrepreneurs on all of the country's major races, but by far the most popular were the sweeps run on the Melbourne Cup.⁹

The growth of sweepstakes matched the rapid spread of illegal totalisator betting shops. They were not the only gambling initiatives promoted by entrepreneurs in the late nineteenth century, but they were among the most prominent. This very feature made them the focus of attack from the element of the Australian community which opposed gambling. The urban middle-class element which had been an almost insignificant component of Australian society, at least until the 1850s, began to find a stronger voice in the second half of the century.

Historians have debated the nature of political change in the mid-nineteenth century and the transfer of political power from the hands of the colonial gentry to those of the urban middle class. Although this debate is far from settled it is clear that the gentry retained power in the colonial upper houses for the remainder of the century and were able to prevent a complete transfer of power to the middle-class, even though the economic structures and priorities of the colonies were adopted to suit the aims of a growing urban middle-class commercialism.¹⁰

Apart from numerical strength the major problem faced by the Australian middle classes in their early attempts to assert dominance over colonial society was the lack of any unifying ideology which could help provide a sufficient sense of purpose and a clarification of their goals. Gradually, towards the end of the nineteenth century these problems were overcome through a combination of factors which included an evangelical Protestant revival, the growth of a political labour movement and the federation of the Australian colonies.

Although other factors played some part, the evangelical revival which began in the Australian colonies in the 1890s arose out of a fear that Australia was in danger of becoming a non-Christian country. Increasing secularization was at its most obvious in the decisions of colonial governments to withdraw their financial support for church run schools, and in the attacks on religion which were based on the scientific discoveries of the era, most notably those which arose from Charles Darwin's *The origin of the Species*. The education debate also contained strong elements of sectarianism as it degenerated

into a vicious debate between Catholics and Protestants. In this atmosphere, evangelical Protestant energy was divided between its attempts to extend its influence to the working classes and its denigration of Catholicism, which traditionally was more successful in ministering to working-class Australians.

The growth of the political labour movement which became apparent with the establishment of a Parliamentary Labor Party in New South Wales in 1890 was also seen as a major threat to Australian middle-class Protestantism. The Labor Party was seen by the urban middle-class commercial interests as a socialist monster which threatened everything that the middle class stood for. As the Party gradually, but consistently, improved its electoral performance in the 1890s, the middle classes faced a very real possibility of the loss of the political power which they were only just managing to wrest away from the old colonial gentry."

Federation of the Australian colonies in 1901 provided the opportunity for the middle-class political groups to re-organise to meet the threat from Labor. In the previous decade they had been divided into two major political groupings, loosely referred to as parties, but differing over little more than attitudes to customs duties. The Free Trade Parties and the Protectionist Parties in the various colonies suddenly found that with federation their fundamental debate was no longer relevant. Customs powers had been handed to the Federal government on the understanding that free trade would exist between the federated states and import duties would apply to goods entering the country from other nations.

With this agreement the middle-classes in the new state parliaments were not only free to re-organise politically, but desperate to find a unifying ideology. Ultimately that ideology was to be found in the form of anti-socialism, but initially their search was clouded by the fact that socialism was only one of their perceived major threats. Secularism and Catholicism were thought to be threats equal to socialism, but worse still was the knowledge that in the Australian colonies the "socialist" Labor Party and the Catholic Church worked closely together. In

middle-class Protestant eyes this combination threatened to impose a dominance of the working-class to an extent which would destroy not only middle-class political influence but also their influence over cultural values.

The difference between the value systems of middle-class Protestantism and working-class Catholicism was most apparent on the issues of gambling and temperance. In middle-class eyes the working classes brought down suffering on themselves and their families through their wasteful indulgence in these evil habits which distracted them from alternative habits of industry and saving, which could have alleviated their lot in life. Simultaneously the perceived wasteful expenditure on drinking and gambling was considered harmful to the economics of the new states because drinking lowered productivity and gambling was an exercise which involved the exchange of money for nothing, and hence was totally unproductive. Worse still it promoted greed which "inevitably" led to crime against property.¹²

The Catholics and the working classes (who were largely synonymous) tended to see these questions differently. According to Catholic theology temptations provided a real purpose. They offered the opportunity for potential sinners to test their faith. If temptation was resisted a positive good was achieved, if not, Confession provided the opportunity to start again. Moreover, Catholics saw little harm in either drinking or gambling. According to them problems arose only when the pastimes were pursued to excess. Although the Catholic Church sponsored temperance societies in the late nineteenth century its support for them was luke warm.

On the other hand, evangelical Protestantism's sponsorship of temperance was enthusiastic. It sought to enrol the people in its temperance campaign and to persuade them to take the pledge. It fought also for the achievement of "local option" legislation which would enable the voters in each electoral district to determine how many hotels should be permitted to operate in their district. Not surprisingly then the Protestant temperance movement in the 1890s was actively organised in the electorates, where it supported the campaigns of those political candidates willing to subscribe publicly to its aims.

After federation, this electoral organisation provided an obvious basis for support of the newly unifying middle-class political interests. The non-labour politicians and Protestant Church temperance organisations found themselves united in political contests against Catholic sponsored Labor. The temperance organisation was essential to the non-labour politicians because Labor had changed the nature of Australian politics through its use of the extra-parliamentary machine and its refinement of other organisational tools. For Protestantism the alliance provided the opportunity for a much 'more direct influence in parliamentary politics.'¹³

In New South Wales, this alliance under the name of the Liberal and Reform Association, won office in 1904, and during its tenure, under the leadership of Premier Joseph Carruthers, it enacted a whole range of reform legislation which aimed to impose a middle-class morality on the society, through the removal of those temptations which distracted the working classes from the pursuit of middle-class goals. Local option legislation was enacted much to the delight of the temperance movement, even though it failed to achieve much change in the number of licenses hotels during the subsequent decade. It was followed quickly by a series of legislative acts which aimed to remove the other major temptations from the path of the workers.

The 1906 Gaming and Betting Act was broadly based. It attempted to localise betting and hence control it completely. It was designed to remove the loopholes in existing legislation which enabled street betting, betting houses and tote shops to operate. It also strengthened police powers to enable easier apprehension and conviction and prohibited all betting by people under the age of twenty-one. Some betting could continue, but it was to be restricted to licensed racecourses which would operate only under government supervision.¹⁴

This legislation was typical of the attempts in this era to impose a middle-class morality onto the working classes. The forms of betting outlawed were those practised by the working class. The gentry could continue to run their race clubs (and their gentlemen's clubs) though race meetings were restricted to

Saturday and Wednesday afternoons and to public holidays, so that if the working classes did attend they would not absent themselves from work to do so.

The legislation did not attempt to prevent the gentry from betting on their races on-course, because such measures had little chance of gaining the necessary approval of the legislature's upper house - where the remnants of the colonial gentry continued to exercise considerable influence. This apparent contradiction in the legislation did not concern the middle-class legislators unduly. Their attempts at temptation removal were aimed clearly at what they saw as the classes who were unable to avoid temptation. The gentry were considered capable of looking after themselves. Furthermore, as in Victorian Britain, middle-class morality was inclined to be most critical of what it considered improper behaviour when that behaviour was open to the public gaze. When practised behind the closed doors of the gentlemen's clubs or on their enclosed racecourses, by people who could afford to lose, gambling was seen by the reformers as merely distasteful rather than evil.

Reform legislation in the other Australian states was similar in essence though there were differences in emphasis. In each case gentry gambling was not prohibited, so the governments found themselves in effect giving legislative sanction to gambling in certain places and at certain times but prohibiting it at other times and places. This contradiction was the loophole which ultimately destroyed the efforts of the middle-class reformers.¹⁵

The Labor Party found itself in a difficult position when confronted with such reform legislation. Whilst recognizing that it was somewhat biased against their class, the Labor leaders were mostly men who held their positions precisely because they subscribed to such middle-class values as the need for 'self-improvement'. The press was also a little ambivalent. It subscribed in general to a middle-class morality but its desire for commercial profit, based on fulfilling what it believed to be the desires of its readership resulted in the situation where editorials condemning gambling appeared alongside news stories

which speculated about the chances of the main contenders at the coming race meetings.¹⁶

It was left to the working-class gamblers themselves to provide opposition to the reform legislation. This they did by disrupting the police attempts to impose the law and by ridiculing the reformers. Police raiding parties were met outside the betting and gaming houses by crowds of bettors who jeered and groaned at the efforts of the police. Other gamblers responded to police inquiries about their names and addresses by providing the names of the reforming legislators or prominent Protestant ministers.¹⁷

These efforts were improved upon by a small section of the press which catered for working-class interests. The *Bulletin and Truth* were two newspapers which printed caricatures of the reformers, designed to treat them as figures of fun who should not be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the working-class gamblers had little chance of preventing the reform legislation without the support of either the Labor Party or the gentlemen members of the upper houses.¹⁸

Within about five years of the passage of the New South Wales Gaming and Betting Act the enthusiasm of the reformers had mellowed. Organised Protestantism had achieved its major aims early in the life of the Carruthers government and so it gradually lost interest in the political process, giving the Liberal politicians a freer reign to determine party policies and priorities. Accordingly the direction of Liberal policy turned away from efforts to remove temptation towards day-to-day administration of government and the development of an anti-socialist ideology. Without the prompting of organised Protestantism, the Liberal Governments were less concerned with enforcing the letter of the reforming laws.¹⁹

As a result, the legislation was ignored by the people. Illegal betting shops prospered. The illegal purchase of sweepstakes tickets and the appearance of illegal two-up games became accepted features of Australian society. Those police who attempted to enforce the laws found themselves hamstrung by legislation which had been made complicated by the need to ensure

that only working-class gambling was prohibited. One favourite technique of the gamblers was to form 'clubs' in imitation of the gentlemen's clubs. In this case however the membership fee was often paid by the proprietor.

In the absence of prodding from organised Protestantism, the various state governments prosecuted illegal gamblers half-heartedly and eventually gave up their attempts to impose a middle-class morality through legislation during the first world war. In the context of the war and partly as a result of the completion of short term clauses in the Federation Agreement of 1901, the Australian states found themselves in difficult financial circumstances. New sources of revenue were needed and one such source gradually became obvious. From 1916 onwards the story of gaming and betting in Australia has been a continuous story of the gradual lifting of legislative restrictions. The liberalisation of gambling laws has been a careful process which has been accompanied by the imposition of state taxes on each newly liberalised form of gambling.²⁰

The totalisator was introduced onto the racecourses in those states which had resisted it since the early 1880s. Lotteries were legalised in all states. Poker machines, greyhound racing, bingo, instant lottery tickets, lotto, football pools, and eventually casinos appeared gradually in some or all of the Australian states. The legalisation of off-course betting on state run totalisator networks was followed by attempts to devise new and exotic ways of persuading the bettor to increase turnover, and hence government revenue.²¹ The most recent of these in New South Wales is labelled the "Superfecta", in which the bettor attempts to forecast the first six placegetters in finishing order on the final race of each Sydney race meeting. If no-one succeeds in forecasting correctly the pool jackpots. Technology has also played its part - with bigger and better computer systems parting the punters and their pay packets more efficiently; and Sky Channel enabling the gamblers to watch their balances shrink "live" before their eyes, from the comfort of their favourite club, pub or TAB office.

To even the most casual observer of Australian society in the 1980s, it is apparent that gaming and betting are prominent features of the Australian way of life. To the historian it should be equally apparent that the forms of gambling most favoured by Australians are those which were typically favoured by working-class gamblers. The poker machine with its regular small returns and its occasional jackpots, lotteries and lotto which offer the possibility of instant wealth in return for a small investment and the exotic forms of totalisator betting, all bear witness to this preference. Only the casinos contradict the picture of a predominance of working-class forms of gambling and they should be seen as an aberration which derives more from the directions of change in the Australian tourist industry than from the world of gambling.

In late twentieth-century Australia, the middle class has triumphed in its attempts to achieve a hegemony over politics and economic structures. Some observers even go so far as to suggest that Australia is almost completely a middle-class society, (provided we do not look too closely at out-groups like the Australian aborigines, street-kids and non-English speaking migrants). Whether this claim is valid or not it is clear that our self-image and national identity continue to contain strong elements of a working-class past. In the gambling area it is clear that working-class values have achieved a dominance.

This is significant because it is one of the few areas of Australian life where working-class values have triumphed. Its importance is emphasised further by the fact that this was achieved against the odds in a very unequal struggle. The continuation of working-class gambling games and events which have a strongly egalitarian bias is lasting evidence of that triumph. Australians continue to ignore the gambling laws despite their liberalisation. Illegal off-course bookmakers remain in business because of the, additional services they provide and because Australia's past has told its people that restrictive gambling laws should be resisted rather than obeyed.

Illegal two-up games and mass support for the Melbourne Cup are part of the general continuation of Australian support for

gambling, but they are also more than this. They are our most prominent symbols of the triumph of the working-class gamblers over the politically and economically powerful middle-class wowsers.

Notes and References:

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7. The totalisator was invented in New Zealand in 1878 to replace the 'army of clerks' required to operate Pierre Oiler's pari-mutual system.
8. O'Hara, *A Mug's Game*, pp.117-8.
9. Wilson, Trevor, *The Luck of the Draw: A Centenary of Tattersall's Sweeps 1881-1981* (Melbourne 1980), pp.23-33. The handicap weights for the Melbourne Cup are announced three months before the race, providing plenty of time for advance betting on the event and for the sale of sweepstakes tickets.
10. Connolly, C.N., "The Middling-Class Victory in New South Wales 1853-62: A Critique of the Bourgeois - Pastoralist Dichotomy", *Historical Studies*, Vol.19, No.76 (1981), pp.369-87.
11. O'Hara, *A Mug's Game*, pp.132-3.
12. *Ibid.*, p.131.
13. For discussion of the political role of Protestants and Catholics in this era, and the contribution of Richard Broome and David Bollen to the historical debate, see *Ibid.*, Ch.5.

14. *Ibid.*, p.142-5.
15. *Ibid.*, p.145-9.
16. The *Sydney Morning Herald* provides a particularly good example of such a newspaper.
17. *Truth*, 10 June 1906.
18. Dunstan, Keith, *Wowers* (Melbourne 1968).
19. Broome, Richard, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (Brisbane 1980), p.160.
20. O'Hara, *A Mug's Game*, Ch.6.
21. *Ibid.*