

## ACTIVITY 4 What does a study of the Miss Australia competition tell us about social change in the 1950s?

During the 1950s the 'Miss Australia Quest' became a successful ongoing venture. Internal issues saw national competition halt between 1950–1952. However, from 1953 Bernard Dowd, Managing Director of Dowd Associates, the Australian manufacturers of Hickory USA lingerie, became sponsor and organiser, and endowed the competition with glamour, style and considerable resources.

### Source 1

Miss Australia Quest 1956 information bulletin

The first aim of the Miss Australia Quest is to find a charming and cultured young Australian woman, to represent her country overseas ... The second aim is to raise much-needed funds for the Spastic Centres of Australia, which do so much towards lightening the load which nature has placed upon young Australians born with cerebral palsy.

In the 1950s services for the disabled were minimal. The provision of disability services such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy was a costly exercise, and new ways of raising money had to be explored. Following meetings between Dowd and the state associations, in 1954 the Miss Australia Quest became the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association's (ACPA) primary fundraiser. It offered the ACPA a high profile way of fundraising on a national level while also educating the Australian public about cerebral palsy.

- 1 Why was there a need to raise funds for people with cerebral palsy?
- 2 Can you see any issues with the use of a Miss Australia competition to raise funds for people with a disability?
- 3 In the 1950s, the Miss Australia competition was an accepted way of raising funds for people with a disability. Compare this view with what you know of society today. Do you think attitudes towards disability have changed? How?
- 4 Look at your summary table on pages 8–9. Make brief notes on any aspects you can for the 1950s.

### Source 2

Miss Australia Quest 1955 poster



## MISS AUSTRALIA QUEST, 1955

### In aid of Spastic Children

*How you can help...*

- 1 ENTER THE MISS AUSTRALIA QUEST
- 2 SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL ENTRANT and your local Spastic Children's Committee in their raising of funds

#### MISS AUSTRALIA WILL RECEIVE THESE PRIZES:—

Wardrobe valued at £1,000 A Miss Australia 1955 Trophy  
A chaperoned overseas trip to Europe, United Kingdom, U.S.A.  
A chaperoned Australian tour to all leading centres  
A £1,000 fee £50 cash prize 250 dollars spending money

**ENTRY FORMS AVAILABLE HERE**

## ACTIVITY 5 What does a study of the Miss Australia competition tell us about social change in the 1960s?

When Miss New South Wales, Tania Verstak, was announced as Miss Australia 1961, it brought issues of immigration and assimilation to the fore. Born in China to Russian parents, Tania was the first naturalised Australian to win the title.



Courtesy Tania (Verstak) Young

People crowding to see Tania Verstak, Miss Australia 1961, during a store appearance at David Jones, Sydney

### Source 1 Tania Verstak, 1961

I was crying inside, crying for the countless New Australians who were feeling, like me, that NOW we really belonged. We were accepted. Now we were Australians.

### Source 2

Extract from a congratulatory telegram from the Minister for Immigration to Tania Verstak 1961

[Your win is] the ultimate demonstration — if any demonstration were needed — of the way in which our new settlers have entered the hearts and lives of the Australian people’.

- 1 Why would Tania Verstak’s win have meaning for both migrants and the government?

Like previous Miss Australia winners, Tania then travelled to America to compete in the Miss International contest held at Long Beach, California. This contest had a ‘National Costume’ judging section, in which entrants were expected to wear their country’s national dress. Without an obvious choice, the costumes worn by Australia’s entrants varied widely and demonstrate shifting approaches to the idea of national identity. At the 1960 contest, Joan Stanbury, Miss Australia 1959, wore an English-style riding habit.

Tania Verstak wore a specially designed golden yellow dress that featured appliqué of Australian state wildflower emblems and a boomerang motif on the skirt front. Tania eventually won the overall competition, becoming the only Miss Australia to also win the title of Miss International.

Dress worn by Tania Verstak for 'National costume' judging at the International Beauty Congress in 1962

Dress by Victor Brown, appliqué by Sydney designer Mona Crawford



Courtesy Tania (Verstak) Young

Donated by Tania (Verstak) Young. National Museum of Australia. Photograph by George Serras

Tania Verstak in Australian national costume, International Beauty Congress, 1962

Unlike many of the beauty contests also operating at this time, the Miss Australia Quest 'garnered intense respect and prestige at all levels of Australian society during 1961.' However, the view that the Miss Australia competition was simply a more dignified beauty contest was widely held. Roslyn Tongue, an entrant in the 1961 Quest regional final, requested a day off from her teaching studies to participate. Her college principal refused to allow her leave, saying that 'it was inappropriate for someone who wanted to be a teacher to be associated with a beauty contest.' Roslyn Tongue found 'this bewildering as she saw the quest as raising money for the Spastic Centre of NSW and the Heart Foundation.'

Kay Saunders and Julie Ustinoff, *A Crowning Achievement*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2005 page 755

2 Consider the view that the Miss Australia competition was 'merely a beauty contest'. Does the following evidence support or refute this claim?



Courtesy Joan Stanbury

Joan Stanbury, Miss Australia 1959, with Miss Ceylon at the International Beauty Congress, August 1960

### Source 3 Miss Australia judging criteria 1960s

- Beauty of face
- Beauty of figure
- Photographic qualities
- Make-up and grooming
- Dress sense
- Personality and poise
- Education
- Social graces
- Voice and diction
  - All 100 points each
- Television potential
  - 250 points.

Miss Australia Quest Judging Sheet. Pamela Woodger private collection. Quoted in Kay Saunders & Julie Ustinoff, *A Crowning Achievement: a study in Australian beauty, business and charitable enterprise*, National Museum of Australia Press, Canberra, 2005, page 82

### Source 4

Press release for Tricia Reschke

When Tricia Reschke, Miss Australia 1962, returned from her overseas tour, the Spastic Centre of New South Wales issued a press release which had her saying of her national tour:

This time, I will be helping The Spastic Centre and promoting the work done by them. This I feel is a truly worthwhile mission and I am sincerely looking forward to every minute of the tour. I will also have a chance to see more of the Country ... Any girls thinking of entering the Quest ... should remember that they are helping Spastic children throughout Australia, to walk, talk, to sit and to have a chance to lead a normal life. If the Spastic Centre did not exist, these children would live their lives as invalids with no hope. The Miss Australia Quest helps The Spastic Centre continue its wonderful work and any girl should be proud to be associated with the Quest.

Press release MA2/363 'Miss Australia Returns in Triumph', issued by the Spastic Centre, 6 Queen Street, Mosman, 1962. Pamela Woodger private collection. Quoted in Kay Saunders & Julie Ustinoff, *A Crowning Achievement: a study in Australian beauty, business and charitable enterprise*, National Museum of Australia Press, Canberra, 2005, page 77

Crowns, tiaras and robes — in designs inspired by British royal regalia — had been part of Miss Australia ceremonies since 1953. However, the first perpetual ‘Miss Australia crown’ was donated to the Miss Australia Quest by Mr and Mrs James Greenfield in 1965. (See Activity 1, Source 1) The Greenfields were proprietors of Toyomoto Australasia, a company that imported Japanese pearls for the Australian market. Mr Ernest Booth, a Melbourne jeweller commissioned by the Greenfields, designed the crown which featured Australian and Japanese pearls in a silver setting based around the wattle flower and leaf. The crown was made by craftsmen in Japan and presented to Miss Australia 1965 at the Tokyo Trade Fair in April that year. The presentation took place nearly 20 years after the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II and is a reflection of Australia’s economic engagement with Japan in the post-war period. Each new Miss Australia winner wore this crown until 1991, when the crown, sash, sceptre and robes that made up the ‘Miss Australia regalia’ were retired from use and the Quest changed its name to the ‘Miss Australia Awards’.

NewsPix



*Mrs James Greenfield with a drawing of Miss Australia's new pearl crown, 1965*

We wanted to show our thankfulness for our 27 years in Australia, and we thought that a new crown would provide interest for the Miss Australia Quest and thus help the spastic children.

Mrs James Greenfield, Melbourne Herald, 1965

Austrade



*Carole Jackson, Miss Australia 1965, receiving the Miss Australia crown from Miss Japan at the Tokyo Trade Fair*

La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, copyright Herald & Weekly Times Photographic Collection



*Aboriginal Miss Australia contestant, Happy Cook, in Darwin's May Day parade, 1961*

During the 1960s, a number of major new corporate supporters became involved with the quest. Sponsored from 1953 by the Hickory (USA) lingerie company, the 60s saw other multinational businesses such as the Ford Motor Company and the Coca-Cola Company sign up to sponsor Miss Australia. An agreement with tobacco company W D & H O Wills (Australia) was not renewed when organisers deemed the association inappropriate for a quest that sought to promote healthy Australian womanhood.

Another significant development was the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander entrants in the Miss Australia Quest.

- 3 Look at your summary table on pages 8–9. Make brief notes on any aspects you can for the 1960s.