

ACTIVITY 6 What does a study of the Miss Australia competition tell us about social change in the 1970s?

During the 1970s progressive social attitudes, changing roles for women and the feminist 'Women's Liberation' movement all impacted on what was considered acceptable and desirable for the modern woman.

In 1973 Miss Northern Territory, Judy Gee, was banned from competing at the national finals when it was revealed that she was an unmarried mother. Quest organisers argued that she would be too busy to carry out the titleholder's duties.



Newspix/News Ltd

Judy Gee, Miss Northern Territory 1973, pictured with her son in the Daily Mirror, 27 September 1973

Source 1 Gail Franzman, 'So, what should Miss A be like?'

50 year old quest with 50 year old morals... with its seemingly stuffed-shirt, single girls, no-children rules, it does symbolise purity and virginity and all that is goodness and light in Australian Womanhood. In recent years this country's society of modern morals and free thinking has not awarded the quests its full stamp of approval, and this year more than others, the quest lacked lustre.

The Herald (Melbourne), 8 November 1976

- 1 What aspect of the Miss Australia Quest does Source 1 criticise?
- 2 What impact does it suggest changing values are having on the Quest?

For many women the development of feminism was a dilemma, as seen in Sources 2 and 3:

Source 2 Kerry Doyle, Miss Australia 1975

'I'm not liberated, I guess. I like to have doors opened for me and to lean on a man's shoulder sometimes.' However, Doyle herself had a Science Degree and a Diploma of Education and worked full-time as a school teacher. She did go on to say that she was supportive of the calls by women's 'libbers' for 'equal pay for equal work and that sort of thing [and in addition] I don't think a woman should be housebound if she doesn't want to be'.

Selena Summers, 'Miss Australia is a science teacher', Australian Women's Weekly, 20 November 1974, p11

Source 3 Feminist commentator, Beatrice Faust

We are told that Miss Australias are not meant to be mannequins or sexpots. They are chosen for their personality and intelligence. This year's interviews were designed to smother any personality or intelligence the girls might have. Beauty contests are the opiate of the misses.

The Age, 4 November 1976

- 3 What aspect of Miss Australia Quest does Faust challenge?

By 1970, the Miss Australia Charity Queen title had been in official use for almost a decade. It was originally introduced to reward the entrant who raised the most amount of money during her year of fundraising. If the Miss Australia Quest was not a beauty contest, then why not make the greatest fundraiser 'Miss Australia'?

When the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association took over the running of the quest, they had the opportunity to award the title of Miss Australia to the highest fundraiser. They chose not to, acknowledging that the competition required elements of the beauty pageant to make it attractive to the public, worthwhile for sponsors and therefore a viable fundraising event.

- 4 Look at your summary table on pages 8–9. Make brief notes on any aspects you can for the 1970s.

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The quest came under attack from a number of directions during the 1980s. The International Year for Disabled Persons in 1981 raised public awareness concerning disability issues. Lobby groups for disabled rights drew on the subsequent increase in public interest to press their claims for the end of the quest, and promoted systems based on equality and respect rather than charity.

Both feminist activists and lobby groups for disabled rights protested outside national finals and campaigned against the quest through the media. They argued that the quest was no longer an appropriate activity for women, and that it had outlived its usefulness as a fundraiser for the disabled. Participation levels in the quest declined as women took advantage of increasing freedom and opportunities elsewhere, and organisers had to work hard to portray the competition as relevant for a new generation of Australian women.

Attracting and retaining sponsorship for the quest was another major challenge in the 1980s. Competition for sponsors was intense, with a number of other high profile charitable causes and major sporting and cultural events all vying for limited corporate dollars.

In 1984 the quest's national finals were broadcast live for the last time. Increasing production costs, lack of public interest and expensive television advertising combined to make the quest an unattractive proposition for television executives.

- 1 Look at the following sources. What aspects of the Miss Australia Quest are threatened, and how are they defended?
- 2 Look at your summary table on pages 8–9. Make brief notes on any aspects you can for the 1980s.

Source 1

Stop the Miss Victoria Quest, 1984

Poster produced by Tanya McIntyre, probably while working as artist-in-residence at Redletter Press, Brunswick, Melbourne



Source 2 Haley Smith, Women with Disabilities Feminist Collective, 1982

There are many oppressions confronting people with disabilities but we have come to realise the body images and the concept of charity are the fundamental ones to redress. The Spastic Society is well aware of this and yet continually confronts the public with its annual Miss Victoria Quest.

Source 3 A newspaper comment

Before selection the finalists and panel were presented with a job brief. Miss Australia's function was clearly defined as promoting the quest and contributing to community education on cerebral palsy on behalf of spastic centres around Australia.

Border Morning Mail, 12 February 1988

Source 4 Caroline Lumley, Miss Australia 1988

I thank you for forking out your \$40 or \$50, but please don't go home and think you have done your bit — because you haven't. All the money in the world means nothing if you don't walk out of here with some understanding of what it is like to have a disability.

Quoted in Katherine Beard, *Miss Australia: A Retrospective: 1908–2000*, Crawford House Publishing, Adelaide, 2001 page 168