

ACTIVITY 8 What does a study of the Miss Australia competition tell us about social change in the 1990s?

The final decade of the Miss Australia competition was fraught with controversy and challenges as quest organisers struggled to adapt it to suit a new era. Government policy regarding services for the disabled was increasingly at odds with the quest's approach. Public interest in the competition was waning, participation levels were dropping, running costs were increasing, and obtaining sponsorship — essential for the success of the event — was becoming difficult.

In 1991 Miss Australia was officially 'crowned' for the last time. In an attempt to update the image of the competition, the name was changed to the Miss Australia Awards. The sashes, robes and sceptres were discarded and business suits and working lunches took the place of evening gowns and gala balls. Entrants became participants and charity queens became fundraisers. Trophies were replaced with plaques, and prizes changed from travel, clothes and cars to investment portfolios, scholarships and small business loans.

- 1 Regal symbolism was removed from the Miss Australia Quest when the regalia was retired from use in 1992. What does that tell you about the event?

While participants still had to raise \$5000 to enter, judging took on the flavour of a job interview, with new selection criteria focusing on personal presentation, public speaking and knowledge of disability issues.

- 2 Compare these criteria with those of the 1960s on page 37. Describe the main differences, and what they tell you about how the image of the competition changed over time.

Despite the difficulties faced by the competition, significant funds were raised for the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association during the 1990s. Corporate and community sponsorship of individual entrants meant that the title of Miss Australia Fundraiser was keenly contested. The Italian Affair Committee was one of the most successful community groups.

Between 1988 and 2000, the committee raised over \$5 million for the Spastic Centre of New South Wales.



Miss Australia 2000 award won by Sheree Primmer, the last Miss Australia. Presented at the Miss Australia Awards Finale Ball, Crown Casino, Melbourne, 12 February 2000.



Kathleen Sergi (front row, centre), Miss Australia Fundraiser 1993, who with the sponsorship of the Italian Affair Committee, raised \$312,000.

On loan from Sheree Primmer-Dell. Photograph by George Serras

Courtesy Kathleen (Sergi) Santaguida

The debate over the inclusion of men in the awards surfaced with Damian Taylor's entry in 1993. Organisers felt that male entries would not be popular with the public and initially resisted his inclusion. They eventually allowed him to compete, albeit in a separate category. In 1997 Myer, an important sponsor of the competition, backed Brad Rodgers. When Brad succeeded in raising the highest amount that year, organisers, unwilling to award the Miss Australia Fundraiser title to a male, presented him with a new title of 'National Fundraiser.'

For the 1999 awards, judges required finalists to demonstrate their communication skills by composing a media release within a set time limit. Rather than an evening event, the lunchtime announcement was made at Parliament House in Canberra. The winner, Kathryn Hay from Tasmania, accepted her award wearing a white business suit. The youngest of seven children from a low-income, high-unemployment area of Launceston, Kathryn was the only Indigenous entrant to become Miss Australia. She described her titleholder year as a 'life changing' experience.

By the late 1990s, it had become clear to competition organisers that the Miss Australia Awards were no longer a viable fundraising vehicle for the Australian Cerebral Palsy Association. In October 1998 organisers announced that the competition would end in 2000. On 12 February 2000 at a finale ball at Crown Casino, Melbourne, the last Miss Australia was announced. Sheree Primmer from New South Wales accepted her award as 'a monument to womanhood and all the achievements of so many great women before me'. Her reign only lasted for the evening.

- 3 Look at your summary table on pages 8–9. Make brief notes on any aspects you can for the 1990s.



Photograph by Lyndon Mechielsen/Newspix

Brad Rodgers, National Fundraiser, walking with Tracy Secombe, Miss Australia 1997 (centre) and Filomena Labbozzetta, Miss Australia Fundraiser.



Photograph by Michael Jones/Newspix

Kathryn Hay, Miss Australia 1999, speaking with family just after the announcement of her award.

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What does the *Miss Australia: A Nation's Quest* exhibition tell us about social change over the period 1908–2000?

Another source of information about the Miss Australia competition is a travelling exhibition developed and presented by the National Museum of Australia — *Miss Australia: A Nation's Quest*. The exhibition contains crowns, tiaras, sashes, sceptres, trophies, robes, dresses, scrapbooks, photographs and programs donated by or on loan from former titleholders in the Miss Australia Quest.

Try to visit the exhibition and add any new ideas or information to your summary on pages 8–9. See <http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/travelling/> for tour dates and venues.

Conclusion

Exploring social change over time 1945–2000 through the National Museum of Australia's *Miss Australia: A Nation's Quest* Exhibition

You have now explored aspects of Australia's social history as illustrated through one event, the Miss Australia Quest.

You should now be able to look at your summary table and discuss many aspects of social change through each decade.

Some aspects will be better covered than others. Some aspects may seem more easily understandable than others. But what you have done is to create a starting point for further exploration either of a particular decade, or a particular social theme through a decade or across several decades.

This period is living history for many people in your family and community. You should use them as a valuable resource, and talk to them about their memories and experiences of the period.

People's memories are a rich and exciting way of getting back into history.

You need to treat their evidence like any other evidence — with great care and caution. People's memories fade; sometimes people believe they remember something when they have actually read about it and only think that it actually happened to them; sometimes they have a particular view of an event that is not reflected in other sources; and sometimes they just remember wrongly!

By exploring a decade or a theme through people, through events, through representations such as a museum display, and through other sources, you will be able to engage with the people and ideas of the past, and appreciate more how they are part of your own history and heritage.

