

Cost and Indulgence: Gloating over New Year's Celebrations

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The gloating over the forthcoming New Year celebrations has already commenced. The first big city to feature on the roundups in each news segment as the year is ushered in tends to be Sydney, self-proclaimed global city in the antipodes, ever keen to rub its vulgar confidence into the noses of rival Melbourne. And, for that matter, every other city since costly fireworks and light displays matter in the image table.

In the time zones where the new year festivities feature with clockwork regularity, Sydney is the first flash, the initiator of the world into another fairly meaningless measurement known as a year, humanity's effort to combat all swallowing eternity. Organisers are interviewed confident that the display will be the "greatest ever".

The problem with such an absolutist catch-all cliché as "greatest ever" is that it surely cannot happen each year. This improbability hardly bothers those behind putting together the event, whose job prescription eschews originality. The Sydney NYE committee, organisers and propagandists, find it entirely feasible that each event is surely greater than the other, and spread this gospel through media outlets without irony. Such optimism, such naked advertising!

This, after all, is an occasion to forget the year that was, to forget woe, crimes against humanity and barrel scraping politicians, appalling decisions and missteps and perhaps most importantly, forget the scruples about the environment and the heating planet.

Everything touching on these celebrations resembles self-promotion at its most cringe worthy, so much so it deserves the tag of grotesque. Even newspapers join the ride, casting aside editorial judgment in favour of back slapping confidence. "After a year that many were happy to leave behind," went the [Sydney Morning Herald](#) at the start of 2017, "an estimated 1.5 million people packed the foreshore on Saturday for a double bill of fireworks climaxing with the world famous midnight pyrotechnics extravaganza." These lines are already being copied to be re-run on the first day of 2018.

That account was more overawed than shocked at the sheer profligacy on display. The Roman Emperors equated displays of extravagance with the worthiness of power. The modern city bureaucrat equates firework displays with the desperate need to have a mention in every significant news outlet in the world. There were seven tonnes of fireworks used at the Sydney Harbour bridge show the last time, including 12,000 shells, 25,000 shooting comets and some 100,000 or so individual pyrotechnic effects. Millions had been expended (\$7 million in one count).

These are not costs all are oblivious to. Even some of the blinded can attain a glimmer of

sight. In 2015, a glummer assessment from the [Australian Financial Review](#) noted that the Sydney Harbour fireworks display would “cost ratepayers more than \$900,000 – or \$45,000 per minute – this year, up 40 per cent on the cost five years ago.”

The hefty \$45,000 figure was arrived at after considering the initial “kids’ fireworks” component at 9 pm (children of all ages need convincing) lasting eight minutes, with the midnight extravaganza for the older ones going for a longer 12 exorbitant minutes.

Behind every bread and circus act is a political figure wanting to sooth and pacify, if for not for any other reason that old fashion tried bribery. Even before the concept of the ballot was invented, the approval of one’s rulers has been sought at intervals, if for nothing else than keeping citizens (or subjects) orderly and satisfied.

While Australians are known for occasional attacks of puritanical wowserism (the country’s head scratching drinking laws, its classifications scheme for film and television count as notable examples) no one wants to be accused of being an anti-fireworks warrior on the city council.

The [AFR](#) documented the response of a City of Sydney spokesperson, who claimed that the fireworks on the New Year’s Eve was “money well spent”. Going back to August, not a single councillor was willing to demur to expanding the budget for fireworks. There would be an influx of spectators; money would be spent, or thrown about, revenue generated for the city’s coffers. Other enterprises would also benefit: extortionate room costs from ideal vantage points, inflated prices for share-rides.

Not all are convinced by this bounty. In 2015, [Lisa Nicholls](#) petitioned the Australian prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull, to “donate Australia’s New Year’s Eve fireworks money to our struggling farmers”. Far from the metropolitan centre of celebratory Sydney were those “who put food on your table and clothes on your back”. They risked “losing everything” after another year of crippling drought.

“How can we sit back on New Year’s Eve,” urged the petition, “and watch millions of dollars literally go up in smoke for a few minutes of our viewing pleasure when this money could do so much towards helping these farmers, the backbone of our country, to fight another day?”

At its close, the measure had received 33,704 supporters. Ah, those unsatisfied spoilsports and irascible party poopers.

Such shows of indulgence must come with warnings of care. This has been a year of the spectacular mowing down incident, the murderous vehicle assault, the endangered tourist. Urban terrorism is alive and well, as are the placebo reassurances of the police. It’s all to do with bollards, come the officials. But this is a show for which no cost will be spared. The punters will be out. The pyrotechnics shall go on. Most of all, the City councillors will be happy.

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