

# PETER COSTELLO

blog [the.telegraph.com.au/blogs](http://the.telegraph.com.au/blogs)



## Cup treat is no fake trick

I don't know when this Halloween nonsense started in Australia. It certainly didn't exist when I was a child. A few nights ago there were all sorts of witches and ghouls and zombies walking the streets of our neighbourhood ringing doorbells and trying to extort lollies from the local residents.

Halloween is big in America. And it is good business for the confectionery industry. The confectionery manufacturers have been pushing the cause along here in Australia. Their other peak period is Easter, when Easter eggs push chocolate sales through the roof. Easter is in the first half of the year. It started as a celebration of new life. Halloween is in the second half of the year. It has something to do with death.

Life or death makes no difference when it comes to the manufacture, sale or consumption of vast quantities



Man From Snowy River. It comes with its recurring cast of characters — the owners, the trainers, Bart Cummings (who seems to have been there since the first race was run) and the jockeys — the Jim Cassidys and Damien Olivers. On the first Tuesday in November the jockey is king. Ignored and sometimes looked down on the rest of the year, the jockey is the hero of the adventure. This is their special day, their one day of the year.

The rest is pageantry. It adds to the colour to have Fashions on the Field. The picnics and champagne and celebrates are all part of the marketing. But at the end it is a race and the horse and the jockey who brings it home.

I have seen the Melbourne Cup presented by royalty, by vice-royalty, by political leaders and captains of industry and every one of them looked awkward to be there and slightly embarrassed to intrude on an event that they

of sweets and chocolate.

Easter eggs are usually given to children by parents or people they know. At Halloween they just demand the goodies — and they can claim it from anyone, including people they have never spoken to before. It is a much more efficient way of gathering loot. And it is backed by some kind of threat that if the victim does not cough up enough they will end up under a curse. I can see why it appeals to children.

Thirty years ago, no self-respecting Australian child would have worried about hollowed-out pumpkins or witches hats at this time of year. We had something far

better than that. We had cracker night with penny bangers and tom thumbs and rockets and catharine wheels and bonfires. This was the explosives business. That was real fun. When all that got closed down in the interest of public safety, young people seriously degenerated. Our kids have turned to extortion. They are fast becoming chocolate-guzzling zombies.

So commercial interests are willing to team up with young children to put Halloween on the Australian calendar? I don't think it will trouble the national consciousness — not in the way our most sacred

day, Anzac Day, does. It is not a patch on the frenzy and excitement of grand final day. It will never match our obsession with the horse race that will be run at 3pm today.

You can't manufacture sentiment. Not the way you can make lollies. Our deepest rituals and observances strike a chord because they connect deeply with the way we see ourselves and those around us.

### You can't manufacture sentiment the way you can make lollies

They grow with shared experiences. There are countless businesses and charities trying to establish the recognition of a special day: Red Nose day, Pink Ribbon day, National Jelly Bean day. There is even a national dog day! Some of these catch on, but most don't. A few years ago some newspapers went to great lengths to try to establish

Earth Hour. The idea was at the same hour on the same day, people would turn off their lights and save the planet. The organisers hoped it would be a day of great repentance and national observance.

It hasn't been a success. It was a top-down campaign by political activists who wanted to tell people what to think.

Today the 153rd Melbourne Cup will be run. There are powerful commercial interests that promote it. But it is an event that grew and entered the national consciousness long before that. Banjo Paterson was writing about it 120 years ago in his poem The

know is not theirs and where they are interlopers and extras to the main event.

The race was not created by political leaders and it grew without them. Like all the great days of the Australian calendar it was built from the bottom up by genuine public support. The people, not the political class, created it.

Which should stand as a lesson. Public opinion will decide the days of great national celebration. If people prefer to celebrate a horse race rather than observe Earth Hour, there is not much that crusading activists can do about it. Confectionery can be manufactured, public opinion is much harder to confer.

Halloween street gangs roam the streets in support of the confectionery industry. Picture: Virginia Young