Affirming Contemporary Australian Identity Through Folk Music: Marketing Cultural Tribalism in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT: From pre-European contact era Aboriginal song-lines, through to the 'old country' ballads brought by convicts and colonists from England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, the creation of a uniquely Australian folk music tradition has reflected more ancient cultures and customs as expressed through the contemporary perceptions and experiences of Antipodean inhabitants. In the 21st century, folk music continues to figure prominently in the public expression of Australian cultural identity; but contemporary Australian folk music now reflects a much broader musical demographic. Identifying the factors that make folk music specifically perceived of in an Australian modality could possibly create a useful marketing tool-kit for the enhancement of Australian music sales in the world marketplace, as well as in the domestic market.

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Australian cultural identity has always been reflected through music. From pre-European contact era Aboriginal song-lines, through to the 'old country' ballads brought by convicts and colonists from England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, the creation of a uniquely Australian folk music tradition has reflected more ancient cultures and customs as expressed through the contemporary perceptions and experiences of Antipodean inhabitants.

In the 21st century, folk music continues to figure prominently in the public expression of Australian cultural identity. While incorporating its origins as an extension of the post-colonial, Anglo-Celtic narrative balladry tradition, and often embracing elements of indigenous Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as well, contemporary Australian folk music now reflects a much broader musical demographic. Just as the Australian population itself has expanded to embrace a wide range of world cultures, reflecting Australia's post World War Two immigration policy and range of late twentieth century refugee communities, so has Australian folk music expanded its boundaries to incorporate the musical community's perception of Australian culture.

So, what makes music Australian? How does Australian folk music, in particular, define and expand contemporary Australian cultural

identity? Identifying the factors that make folk music specifically perceived of in an Australian modality could possibly create a useful marketing tool-kit for the enhancement of Australian music sales in the world marketplace, as well as in the domestic market. Coyle (2003) states that musical and audio elements are utilised in highlighting related matters of cultural identity, and also as a method of suggesting the land in an Australian outback context. According to Coyle, 'The soundscapes of rural Australia—what is heard in the country as well as what is seen— contribute immeasurably to experiences of location and place' (Coyle 2003, p. 8).

Attempting to define an Australian sound is a complex matter, according to Douglas:

> While some forms of music might be easier to recognise as having an Australian sound because of particular lyrical content or style (such as bush music, folk) it was difficult to define an Australian sound in all genres of music. (Douglas 2000, p. 3)

Douglas highlights the point that some Australian musical genres are more difficult to identify as Australian. However, he does point out that bush music and folk music are both genres which are easier for musicians and audiences to perceive of as specifically Australian.

Australian folk music (specifically as expressed in its 21st century forms) is also a sub-genre of the Australian roots music hybrid, evolving as an organic form which has developed an Australian identity (over decades of adaptation of the Anglo-Celtic, African-American, and Aboriginal influences) which have contributed to the creation of Australian popular-folk music on the whole (Smith, 2005).

Alt.country is another roots music sub-genre which is currently being integrated into Australian folk music modalities by acoustic musicians, reflecting Coyle's earlier comments regarding the essentially rural nature of Australia's soundscape. Beal and Peterson state,

> Rather than being a single style of music such as Dixieland jazz, house, minimalist music, or acid rock, whose development is in the hands of creators, alternative country is more a congeries of music that fans find sounds well together and express much the same sentiments. (Beal & Peterson, 2001, p. 235)

The boundaries between traditional country music and traditional folk music in Australia are thus increasingly blurred, as demonstrated by the emergence of alt.country influenced roots musicians appearing at major folk music events such as the Woodford Folk Festival (Eliezer, 2008).

This expansion of genre boundaries is further witnessed by the many folk music acts

which are beginning to make appearances at 'fringe venue' mainstream country music events such as the Tamworth Country Music Festival (Andrew Clermont, pers. comm., 2006). While many previous concepts of genre were firmly defined by the mid-to-late 20th century marketing practices of major label American music companies and mainstream music retailers, with the advent of the Internet as a music listening and purchasing tool, Australian folk musicians and folk audiences now have a much greater role in defining a specifically Australian cultural identity through folk music. This helps in the creation of cultural tribalism, whereby people define themselves—who they are, where they are, and how they choose to perceive of their own personal identities—through the conscious or even unconscious association with like-minded people in a neo-tribal construct, in this case, a musical tribe.

Shuker (2005) explains that popular music genres function as marketing categories and reference points for musicians, critics and fans. Thus, from the consumer perspective, identifying with a genre can help an audience to develop a cohesive sense of musical tribe. Taylor (1997) contends that globalisation equals change (substantive social and cultural change), and discussed how the old model is being challenged by new realities, changing old corporate models in a changing world. He stated,

> Appropriation is rarely just sort of appropriation… any sort of cross-cultural musical interaction is an appropriation with multiple implications. (Taylor, 1997, p. 40).

Musical genres tend to be honed and defined by a 'scene', or niche community, which nurtures that particular style by purchasing music in that genre, and by attending live shows presented by the genre's performers. Smith (2005) discusses the value of an existing, single-genre musical 'scene', observing, 'The argument so far has been drawing out the deep underlying structures and ideas which provide unity to the various scenes and musics. Within this, though, there are many contradictions and differences.' Smith states that these differences developed because crossovers are possible, especially within the context of the strength of a music scene's evolving ideas and values. He acknowledges that innovation can take place, and also that debates and arguments can occur—thus, affecting the way a musical genre defines itself, either by what it perceives itself to be, or not to be.

Smith notes, 'For example, it is because country music fans know what they like that they can listen appreciatively to Eric Bogle, it is because folkies appreciate authenticity and sincerity of address that they

book hip hop artists at the 2005 Woodford Festival' (Smith, 2005, pp. 200-201) Smith's observations about the role of Woodford, primarily founded as a folk festival, but increasingly presenting an expanded range of roots and world music to a very diverse audience demographic spread, highlight the ability of Australian folk musicians to cross genres, and to blur musical boundaries with increasing ease. This expansion of the Australian folk music genre, in turn, helps to expand 21st century perceptions of Australian cultural identity, reflecting the more multi-cultural nature of contemporary Australian society, rather than the more rigidly-defined, specifically Anglo-Celtic post-colonial society of the mid-twentieth century.

Davey and Faine (1996) examine the marketing of music events, including genre-specific festivals, as tourism drawcards in regional Australia. Supporting Smith's observations, they also point out that some festivals with a single genre origin, such as the Woodford (previously Maleny) Folk Festival, have become multi-genre events. In this sense, the public presentation of community-based musical events, such as folk festivals, can actually help to define Australian cultural identity in a contemporary way.

Australian folk festivals have helped many artists to become associated with a particular musical milieu, utilising the folk music community as a springboard. According to Neuenfeldt (2000), the technological advances offered by widespread access to CD production have allowed musicians to define themselves by genre, particularly within an Australian folk music context. Independently-produced CDs have allowed folk festival organisers to program music independent of traditional genre constraints, and the CD itself has become a marketing tool, as well as a product, in this regard.

Because audience members will often travel long distances in order to attend a festival, and to participate in a 'scene', their act of travel and subsequent interaction with other individuals across demographic boundaries may assist in the expanded community perception of Australian identity as expressed through folk music. Connell and Gibson (2003, p. 160) discuss the process of evolutional musical genre diffusion, commenting,

> While technological changes, marketing strategies and changes in taste and style have been crucial in the geographical distribution of music, other forms of music diffusion are based largely on the movements of people rather than products or capital.

In concordance with Smith, as well as Davey and Faine, Connell and Gibson's description of the development of a contemporary (music-based) tribal identity touches on the idea of music developing around a

community—which can be physical (based around a festival, such as Woodford) or technological (the virtual communities which grow through association on social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.)

As the Australian population has expanded well beyond its indigenous and Anglo-Celtic origins to become a multicultural society, multicultural performers from international backgrounds are increasingly valued as folk musicians within Australia, and publicly presented at national events such as the WOMADelaide festival in South Australia. According to Nexica (1997), music genres which combine previously separate elements are now gaining an expanded audience, and the established music industry is only beginning to come to grips with this development. She contends that previously marginalised, world music performers (including those from non-English speaking backgrounds) are a contributing element of this process.

Music in general, but folk music in particular, brings previously unaffiliated people together through a shared musical experience, enhancing a sense of tribalism and community. Lathrop highlights the connections made by symbolic genre definition through brand association, and values-based marketing strategies:

> Audiences are attracted to more than melodies: they may fall for the performer's personality and look. They may feel a kinship with the lifestyle and philosophy expressed by the performer's songs and stance. Music as a product can be a powerful symbol for the tastes and beliefs of a defined group of people. (Lathrop, 2003, p. 30)

Establishing a clearly-recognisable Australian folk music brand is a marketing priority if the music is intended for export. In the case of the evolution of contemporary Australian folk music as an identifiable brand, the tangible 'Australian-ness' of the brand identity assists in differentiating it from the somewhat similar American product, sometimes marketed as 'Americana'. Bridson and Evans (2005) state that 'brand orientation is conceptualised as a multidimensional construct encompassing… values, beliefs, behaviours, and practices towards brands.' (Bridson & Evans, 2005, p. 404.) Kucukemiroglu (1997) notes that market segmentation is determined (to some degree) via an ethnocentric bias, effectively providing a branding opportunity to Australian folk musicians within the domestic market.

The musician, as leader, is instrumental in the creation of his/her own brand. According to Vallaster and de Chernatony (2006), leaders within organisations mediate the process of brand building between the individual consumer, and the corporate branding structures which seek to meet their needs. They further summarise the role of individuals in the

brand building process as 'brand ambassadors' (p. 771). In an Australian folk music application, this concept could be extended to the role of musicians as brand ambassadors representing themselves in the consumer dialogue, and within the construct of the musical tribe (and thus, the contemporary definition of Australian cultural identity).

When members of a community with common values gather together, such as a dedicated fan-based connected to a particular genre or individual artist, the possibility for street-level marketing is enhanced Dann and Dann (2006) discuss street level marketing as

> the marketing activities undertaken by a member of a psychographic niche to further the adoption of an idea, good, or service, developed within the niche, to meet the specific needs and wants of the niche. (p. 1)

In this regard, the Australian folk music niche can be addressed in terms of market segmentation. The psychographic niche members (the independent folk musicians and band managers) are in a constantly evolving process of refining and re-defining their niche (Australian folk music), in order to meet the needs of that niche (the audience members.) This evolutionary marketing process, which is an aspect of market segmentation, is heightened through the use of the Internet as a music marketing tool. By removing the traditional, 20th century role of the major label record company (often American) as genre definer and 'gatekeeper', the Internet has provided consumers with greater access to related music modalities, across a range of similar and related genres. In this sense, the internet allows Australian music consumers to ally themselves within an Australian folk music tribe (reinforced by their regular attendance at folk festivals around Australia). The process also allows international music consumers to identify Australian folk music as a definable product, within a national identity.

As described, this process, when driven by marketers from within the niche itself (in this case, Australian folk music), creates market immersion. Integrity, in the form of credibility, as well as the concept the researchers termed 'Aidemheil' (faith in the product and self-belief), are important elements which cannot be 'faked' in this context. The organisation must, in essence, be an accepted member of the community of niche stakeholders in order to effectively deliver these marketing activities.

This has direct implications for the development of Australian folk music by independent bands and managers as an expanded niche, embracing and encompassing several previously defined sub-niches (genres). In turn, as Australian society expands and evolves in a

multicultural manner, Australian cultural identity is likewise expanded, partially identified and defined through its folk music.

Dann and Dann state,

> In terms of creation, communication and delivery of value, it may be possible to incorporate faith in the marketer's product as a form of psychic value to the consumer in a manner similar to that experience with brand communities. For example, the provision of the possibility of a solution to a market need can create a product faith based value exchange for the consumer—the consumer gains value from hope, or the belief that the product will meet a need (Dann & Dann, 2006, p. 5).

Within the development of a specifically Australian cultural identity through its folk music, which is largely driven from within the niche by independent musicians and management, this faith-based delivery of an almost imperceptible psychic valuing of the 'new' product (roots music) as an authentic form of Australian cultural expression provides a solution to a market need, which reflects the desire of Australian audiences to embrace a contemporary musical genre of its own, rather than just delivering Australian versions of twentieth century American genres.

Within this context, branding can create powerful emotional bonds with valued goods and services in individuals. Treacher (2007) states that 'people love to 'hold onto' things, and brands are no different.' He theorises that people feel most attracted to compelling emotional brand values that resonate with a market or market segment, and that brands cannot afford to turn their backs on these emotional bonds.

The view on brand personality presented by Donahay and Rosenberger (2007) indicates that brand personality congruency can develop between a product (in this case, a sporting event) and a business (the event's corporate sponsor.) Their study concluded that fan identification had a significant role in the image transfer from the event to the sponsor, a concept with potential application to Australian folk music fans' potential image transfer from an event (a musical performance, concert, or festival) to a corporate entity such as a record label, media outlet, or music event sponsor.

Possessions and items of a personal nature, such as clothes which relate to self-expression, can help to reinforce the act of personal branding. Buresti and Rosenberger (2006) suggest that brand personality is an essential ingredient in the process which assists businesses in achieving lasting differentiation and on-going, more sustainable competitive advantage in the market-place. Their analysis of clothing, self expression and culture in a marketing context yielded information relevant to the marketing by genre of Australian folk music.

They state, 'All voluntary consumption carries symbolic meaning, therefore, consumers will consume products that hold particular symbolic meaning.' Buresti and Rosenberger then contended that this congruence of self-image is able to predict and explain various aspects of behaviour by consumers, specifically including brand loyalty, ad effectiveness, brand attitude, product/brand use, brand relationship quality, and intention to purchase. (Buresti & Rosenberger, 2006, p. 2)

One illustration of this theory in popular practice is the preponderance of T-shirts, caps, bags, and other merchandise items bearing the slogan, 'People's Republic of Woodfordia', which are sold exclusively at Queensland's Woodford Folk Festival. The purchase and national display of these items of apparel represent an affiliation with the Australian folk music tribe in general, and the Queensland/Woodford Folk Festival tribe in particular, highlighting the perception of this tribal group as its own national self-identity, contained within the collective Australian cultural identity.

Buresti and Rosenberger highlight the possibility that subculture indicates which symbolic group one belongs to, and demarcates that group from the mainstream. They state,

> Subcultures help distinctive subgroups of consumers create and preserve unique identities through various forms of consumption practices, resulting in an identifiable social structure with a shared set of beliefs, values, relationships, and modes of symbolic expression. (2006)

This concept applies to the contemporary Australian folk music market, where consumers are eager for more product (the problem), but this product must be supplied to them in a sub-culturally acceptable way (i.e., digitally.) Tuominen et al (2004, p. 207) address the topic of customer intimacy, stating that this proves tailors offerings to match the exact needs of customers. This represents an important aspect of brand personality—in effect, the product is the solution to a consumer 'problem', meeting a need where previously there was a sense of lack or need. They discuss the principle of 'responsiveness capability', turning knowledge generated by customers into products and business concepts which address the needs of those customers.

The sense of belonging, whether to a musical tribe, or as part of a virtual community, has implications for the implementation of relationship marketing approaches for Australian folk music. Ballantyne (2004) indicates that relationship marketing was initially categorised as an extension of services marketing, but that via the influence of increased globalisation and digitally-based technology applications, it has now evolved into the theory and practice of community-building and relationship-enhancing marketing activities. He maintains the principle that customers and suppliers (i.e., folk audiences and musicians) can

derive value from establishing a mutually-determined marketing relationship, stating that 'the co-creation (or co-production) of value through interaction between customer and supplier (in the service encounter) has long been one of the core tenets of services marketing and the wellspring for much relationship marketing thinking' (p. 97).

Network theory, which identifies individuals as 'actors' within a pattern of connection, applies the growing social capital of each individual 'actor' within a contextual relationship referring to their social/interpersonal connections. Network theory is particularly applicable to the analysis of the creation of a shared contemporary Australian cultural identity through Australian folk music, specifically because the Australian folk festival audiences and digital consumer demographic is so focused on tribal identity as part of their music consumption patterns.

Fan-based genre identity relates to consumers perceiving of themselves as members of specifically-defined, musical affinity groups. By initiating and opening a series of relationships with these groups, and then encouraging relationships to develop naturally with similar affinity groups, (thus blurring and expanding the boundaries between the groups) relationship marketing could be utilised to help music fans develop a stronger, broader sense of community, with the marketed product (Australian folk music) being the social glue that binds this expanded community together. Utilising on-line social networking sites such as MySpace, Bebo, and Facebook, the practical implications of relationship marketing are evident for Australian folk music performers and folk festival organisers.

Within the music industry, the creation and attraction of fans is crucial to brand building. An emotional connection with a product enhances categorisation, and vice versa. Smith, Fisher, & Cole (2007) observe that categorisation can represent an emotional bonding with a product in the mind of the consumer, commenting that

> In some sense, it is it is odd that as we enter a post-Enlightenment phase of culture and society, passion and intensity are having their revenge on the once cherished ideals of objectivity and rationality. Reason is proving to be its own form of madness.

They note that in marketing, the shift has been registered as classic concepts to build brands based on cognitive and utilitarian factors.

They state that this shift is encapsulated by the 'mind share' model, and had begun to give way to emotional branding, viral marketing, and fan-based marketing that increasingly worked in a similar way to cults to 'create impassioned devotees and brand evangelists.' They conclude,

'Fanaticism and fandom are becoming the story of the times, and of central importance to marketing theory and practice' (p. 78).

Smith, Fisher, & Cole's position on consumer-driven categorisation is that several distinct themes arise through their research: one, informants have a sense of being settled and at home in the world in their devoted attachments; two, consumers can find ways to 'de-fanaticise' their behaviour in relation to some extreme endpoint (and thus, fanaticism from the insider's perspective disappears); three, passion and emotion (instead of being peripheral to consumer patterns of decision-making and behaviour models, should be a primary marketing consideration (pp. 89-91).

The authors conclude that the 'the necessity and impossibility of categorising things in the world according to definitive categories is part of the human condition…the inter-case themes presented in this research direct us to realise the importance of consuming, whether it's a product or activity, in the formation of identity' (p. 92). In summary, Smith, Fisher, & Cole's research highlights the point that consumers tend to define themselves through the categorisation of their consumption. They identified the circumstances which stimulated this process of self-definition, which helped to delineate the way labels and categories assist consumers in finding their sense of self through what surrounds them. As this is the very mechanism which creates and nurtures musical fans, Smith, Fisher, & Cole's work is especially relevant to this study.

Because the Australian folk music genre has evolved from previously (fairly rigidly defined), highly self-categorised Anglo-Celtic origins to becoming the most diverse and musically integrated of the Australian roots sub-genres, (as exemplified by folk events such as the multi-genre Woodford Folk Festival), Australian cultural identity, as expressed through contemporary folk music, has also expanded in a more multicultural manner. Smith states, 'This [diversity] has become the characteristic approach of the folk movement, particularly in its embracing of world music and multicultural musical diversity… the folk movement embraces excitement and the challenge of the unfamiliar…' (Smith, 2005, p. 201)

In 2008, this author conducted case studies from across a range of Australian folk music (and associated sub-genre) practitioners. The purpose of these care studies (in part) was to seek illustration of the marketing principles under discussion, specifically within an Australian cultural context, in order to gain insight into ways Australian roots music in general (and Australian folk music in particular) could strengthen its marketing platform on a national and international level. On the whole, the folk music industry professionals tended not to identify the folk brand category as a professional affiliation or industry, instead referring to the folk movement. (The folk festivals traditionally held throughout

Australia, in both urban and regional areas, are usually organised by volunteers from within the community, and musicians often perform with little or no pay). In general, the Australian folk music practitioners appeared to be very conscious of their music genre's brand identity, and especially of its origins in the post-colonial Anglo-Celtic narrative balladry tradition. Many folk festival organisers have been actively implementing cross-genre and world music marketing activities, citing the Woodford Folk Festival and the Port Fairy Folk Festival as an inspiration (Andrew Clermont, pers. comm. 2006).

In general, the case study respondents tend to agree on the definition of Australian folk music. However, there are still markedly strong differences of opinion. Music label manager Tim Holland, music marketer Max Ellis, music magazine editor Mike Freeman, academic Graeme Smith, and folk performer Andrew Clermont all discuss folk music as being 'traditional' in nature. Both Graeme Smith and folk magazine editor Cec Bucello associate folk music with singer-songwriters; connected with this narrative balladry tradition is musician 8 Ball Aitken's mention of folk music in association with 'storytelling'. Country label manager Cliff Giles calls folk music 'pre-hippie', while, conversely, country music festival manager Rebel Thompson associates folk music with 'hippies'. Blues festival promoter Rob Hudson connected folk music with 'coffee shops', and blues performer Ash Grunwald associate folk music with 'festivals', both places where hippies are known to congregate. Tim Holland and country performer Jim Haynes identify folk music as Australian, while Cliff Giles connects folk music with England.

Some respondents observe that Australian musicians could successfully market themselves within an Australian identity context. Jim Haynes cites the 'contact with the Australian spirit' as a factor to take into account when devising marketing plans for Australian artists. Haynes' marketing recommendations include suggested content, including politically-themed lyrics, stating: 'Get [the] artists to write and sing about issues, [the] big social issues of the day, war, immigration, water.' This comment falls into line with the underlying ethos and message of folk music from the nineteen-sixties, and more recently, similar to Australian folk/roots musician John Butler's career in this century. Effectively, it seems that Haynes is suggesting a marketing strategy involving songs about current issues, and which relate to Australia (in the Australian music marketplace).

Other interviewees (including respondents Max Ellis, Rebel Thompson, and Cliff Giles) identify a distinctly Australian cultural identity as an asset in the music marketing process. Rebel Thompson comments, 'Have a distinctly Australian identity—something different when pitching overseas.' Max Ellis agrees, noting 'Sell yourself as an

Aussie (like Rolf Harris) or meld into the mainstream (like Keith Urban)'. Similarly, Cliff Giles advocates using Australian imagery in the marketing of independent 'mulga music' (country/folk/roots music) CDs.

The folk music respondents identified potential marketing strategies for Australian musicians in different ways. Australian folk music artists The Waifs (who charted for one week in the 2007 Billboard charts) were mentioned as successful examples of folk/roots cross-over musicians (Billboard, 2008). In some cases, the prevailing (20th century) 'traditional' folk genre view on cross-genre marketing of roots music was negative, and was perceived of as diluting the authentic Australian folk music tradition.

Conversely, the prevailing folk music indie-label/independent views on cross-genre marketing was somewhat more positive, indicating that such music was fresh, and brought new sounds to the audience. The prevailing views of folk music practitioners included comments noting that many folk-related genres are very close to each other, and can fit into more than one musical category—thus enhancing a more multicultural perception of the Australian national identity, as expressed through its contemporary folk musicians.

The majority of the folk music industry respondents perceived of, and defined cross-genre marketing, as a positive method of increasing market-share. They primarily identified the combined methods of internet promotion and festival participation to enhance community involvement (and tribal connection) with Australian folk music.

In summary, the recommendations and principles identified by the case study respondents generally support the marketing concepts of 'music as tribe' under discussion. Just as Australia's demographic spread has considerably broadened since the mid-20th century, so too has Australian folk music expanded its boundaries to include new perceptions of being Australian, and new ways of performing Australian folk music, in the 21st century. Perhaps because modern Western society in general has become increasingly diffuse, the renewed interest in Australian folk music (as witnessed by the exponential growth of Australian folk festivals, as well as a greatly increased presence of contemporary Australian folk music on the internet) has helped to stimulate a new sense of Australian tribal identity among music consumers.

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* This article has been adapted in part from the author's previous work,
Cross-genre Marketing of Australian Roots Music (2008).

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NOTE:
    On 12-13 July, 2009 at the University of New England there was held the
Second Australasian Narrative Enquiry Conference, subtitled 'Embracing
Multiple Dimensions', a research exercise led by the American professors,
Jeffrey Kottler and Matt Englar-Carlson.
    These two gave a keynote address entitled: 'The Power of Stories:
Reciprocal Influences Between the Researcher and the Participant'. They also
held a workshop exploring Narrative Journeys, arguing that Narrative Journeys
were parallel processes that could also explore the impact that the research
using narrative inquiry has had on the life of the researcher at the time of the
research, as well as long after the research has ended.

    N.B. The essay in the present issue, pp. 235-246, may be held to have had
some of the consequences suggested by this plenary session.

                   Robert James Smith