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An end to Australia's auto dream: why we loved Holden

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An end to Australia's auto dream: why we loved Holden

Abstract

Yesterday we learned that our collective support for Holden is coming to an end. The demise of "Australia's Own" has been on the cards for years. After all, this country is one of the most expensive places in the world to produce cars.

We are not alone or even the biggest subsidisers of car manufacturing, of course.

National economies as different as China, Japan, France and the USA have always offered incentives to keep cars rolling off assembly lines. But public funding for private enterprise runs deep in Australia – and it has never been just a matter of economics.

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Holdens – such as this FJ model – defined a national culture of mobility and masculinity in 20th century Australia. Wikimedia Commons

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There was widespread support for subsidising the production of vehicles like the Holden FB.
Wikimedia Commons

Subsidising the Australian dream

From the earliest years of British occupation, we cobbled together an Australian version of capitalism that collectively fostered and protected industries big and small.

Colonial authorities gave away land, seed, free labour, and licenses to trade in rum, run a ferry service or fish the harbour. In the 19th century colonies built railway lines and ports for miners and pastoralists, as well as dams, artesian bores and telegraph lines.

And in the 20th century there was wide support for government-nurtured infrastructures and enterprises, from banks and telecommunications companies, [the Snowy Mountains Scheme](#) and, yes, the first GMH plant in Fishermans Bend in 1936.

Such initiatives were seen as innovative and distinctively Australian ways to grow a modern settler society. They were designed not just to secure prosperity but also to create a more harmonious and equitable nation than the one we had left behind.

Cars for a rugged landscape

Australians are known as early and enthusiastic adopters of new technologies.

The first cars were quickly drawn into the prevailing confidence that technology was the solution for problems of settling the continent and learning to belong in the landscape. Cities were their natural habitat, but well before cars were up to the job, conversations turned to how useful they would be in the arid back country, where water and horse feed was scarce.

Over the next decades, as the new nation was finding its feet, automobile “overlanders” became a new kind of popular hero as they drove – and pushed and dragged – their machines into places they were not designed for. Overlanding pioneers were greatly admired for opening out the “vast blank places on the map” to white settlement and, after the second world war, to recreation and tourism.



Holden cars opened up the Australian landscape. Wikimedia Commons

Cars and Australia emerged at the same time and the utilitarian value of cars helped to create a national car culture with a different emphasis.

More than an item of frivolous city consumption, an object of leisure and fashion, or means of display for the ultra wealthy, early Australian car culture also spoke to more patriotic sentiments. There was an affinity between cars and the development of the nation that made them central to how life on this continent would be imagined and lived.

Like steam engines on the Great Plains of America in the 19th century, images of cars grinding across the spinifex plains of the Central Desert – with the obligatory Aboriginal warrior leaning on his spear and watching from the distance – became emblematic of the ways cars were becoming integral to our sense of ourselves.

A mobile and masculine citizenry

There was much talk about how the movement of cars was reshaping the continent and creating a mobile citizenry. After the second world war, the special place cars held in national

culture was institutionalised in the hugely popular decision to fund an all-Australian car. Holden soon captured half of the market.

Football, meat pies, kangaroos and Holden cars – a Holden ad from the 1970s.

But the great enthusiasm that greeted the first Holden sedans in the 1950s was only peripherally related to factors such as national development, full employment, or the security benefits of industrial self-sufficiency.

Seen from a different angle, the utilitarian value of the Holden was a story that helped to deflect attention from the less rational emotions and values that gave cars their immense power in our lives. It diverted eyes away from the reality that this item of mass consumption was saturated with meanings beyond the nuts and bolts of the thing itself and its function as a means of transport.

As much as Holden advertisements used images of women to signify their stylishness, as much as Australian women, too, had ambitions to drive them, and as much as Holdens were marketed as family cars, they were predominantly in the hands of men.

Men who did not yet own a Holden could dream of that happy day.

Here was a prized commodity that altered practices and ideas of Australian masculinity. Men were no longer only the producers of goods, but in an era of growing national prosperity, they were increasingly defined through what they consumed and how they did it.

A new mode of consumption

Unlike feminine consumption, which had been long established as domestic and frivolous, car consumption was not mere passive consuming. Cars seemed to be about much more important and exciting things – mastering machinery, conquering the “tyranny of distance” and acquiring new knowledge and skills.



An advertisement for the Holden Isuzu from the 1970s.

Hugo90

Holdens were at the heart of those changes.

Proud Australian expressions of masculinity that cut across class differences were built around [Holden FXs](#) and [FJs](#) in the [Redex reliability trials](#) and the [Monaros](#), [Toranas](#) and [Commodores](#) on the Mountain.

Masculinity was even reinvented behind the steering wheel of the maligned suburban [Kingswood](#).

Throughout the era of baby-boomer optimism, visions of men in Holdens trailing plumes of dust on dirt tracks, finding happiness in just burning miles or bush bashing, or the joy of taking the family on a long drive to the beach seemed to define a settler Australian birthright.

The end of the Holden era

Later generations grew up with a much more mundane experience of cars.

Their investments in technology appear to be very different. Studies suggest that young men and women now are more passionate about digital connectivity than their driving licenses.



Where old Holdens go to die. Rossco (Image Focus Australia)

Cars are more androgynous objects, and masculinity and femininity is much less bound up with the things we do with them. Their global manufacture, design and marketing rarely invoke national sensibilities. Developments such as automatic braking systems have taken over functions from the driver – and the idea that Dad might change the oil filter on the front lawn is barely thinkable.

Not only is there little political clout in the conviction that maintaining employment and sustaining working class communities deserves collective investment, but old fantasies of gunning down the wide open road in “Australia’s Own” no longer resonate in national dreams.

Perhaps that is part of the grief that many are feeling.

FURTHER READING:

- [Moving on: Holden closure shows we need a new growth agenda](#)
- [Walking away from Holden: Abbott finishes what Hewson started](#)
- [Holden to cease making cars in Australia by 2017: experts react](#)