

'Exhausted majority' can rejoice over a year of averted catastrophes

[Henry Ergas](#) December 20, 2019

Christmas gift guide

Cumulative totals Australia*

	2010	2018	2019
Partridge in a pear tree	\$960	\$990	\$944
Two Turtle Doves	\$440	\$587	\$440
Three French Hens	\$2400	\$1200	\$975
Four Calling Birds (canaries)	\$1440	\$840	\$840
Five Golden Rings	\$10,689	\$14,754	\$15,740
Six Geese (laying)	\$4200	\$5180	\$4900
Seven Swans	\$50,400	\$63,000	\$63,000
Eight Maids Milking	\$600	\$757	\$780
Nine Ladies Dancing	\$28,080	\$25,249	\$25,812
Ten Lords Leaping	\$23,400	\$21,041	\$21,510
Eleven Pipers Piping	\$2532	\$3830	\$3930
Twelve drummers drumming	\$1381	\$2089	\$2143
Total	\$127,482	\$139,517	\$141,014

*Total price multiplied by the number of times the gift is repeated in the song

Source: Author's estimates

How fortunate is the true love in the Twelve Days of Christmas! From the first partridge in a pear tree to the last drummer drumming she receives exactly 364 gifts: a present for each and every day of the year to come, excluding Christmas Day.

Why not 365? Because the nativity was the greatest gift of all, compared to which any human generosity seemed as pale as it was idolatrous. There was, the carol's medieval composers tried to remind us, a love greater than even the most passionate romance, and which endured when the trees had shed their fruits, the birds had moulted, and the drummers' drums had fallen silent.

Christmas was therefore the end of the gift-giving, not its beginning. The day without an earthly present, and that brought the cycle to a close, it

celebrated a divine gift that offered far more than money could buy. But that never stopped materialism from intruding.

Little wonder, then, that the complaints about a frenzy of consumption drowning any sense of higher purpose long predate today's festivities.

As early as the High Middle Ages, the enormous sums spent on food, drink, dress and the prankish ceremonies of the Lord of Misrule, a vestige of the Roman Saturnalia, sparked widespread hand-wringing about spiritual decline.



Actors take part in a dress rehearsal for the Wintershall Nativity play in Guildford, England. Picture: Getty Images

And as the Italian expression for a frantically busy person — “ha piu da fare che i forni di Natale in Inghilterra” (he is busier than an English oven at Christmas) — attests, no one had a worse reputation than the English for going over the top.

The Puritans, who in 1647 sent the lord mayor of London scouring the city to incinerate any evergreen decorations he could find, tried during their spell in power to stamp out what they regarded as an unspeakably pagan rite. Predictably, their efforts proved a miserable failure, and after the bans they had imposed on Christmas celebrations were finally lifted in 1660, it took virtually no time at all for the onward march of indulgence to resume.

Even Charles Dickens — described in a 2017 blockbuster as The Man Who Invented Christmas — recoiled from what he saw. Yes, the holiday was cast as the triumph of benevolence over selfishness in *A Christmas Carol*, which was published in 1843. But two decades later, when *Great Expectations* appeared, and even more so in his final novel, *The Mystery*

of Edwin Drood, Dickens portrayed Christmas as hopelessly mired in excess, tawdriness and greed.

Unquestionably, this year too, those vices will be prominently on display. Who knows, one of Australia's ever-growing stock of multimillionaires might even shower on his or her loved ones the full set of gifts listed in the carol.

After all, at just over \$140,000, up by barely 1 per cent since last year, the Christmas Price Index shows that it remains far more affordable than a luxury yacht, and a burst of purchases from the "rich-listers" would provide a welcome yuletide boost to Australia's milking maids, dancing lords and ladies, pipers and drummers, whose aggregate incomes have stagnated since our index began exactly a decade ago.

Moreover, in an age in which every purchase — from the humblest avocado toast to the most luxurious overseas holiday — is immediately posted on Facebook and Instagram, fuelling the daemon of competitive consumption, what could more impress one's thousands of social media "friends" than a dazzling array of exotic birds and magnificently costumed troubadours?

But it would be grossly unfair to reduce the holiday to its worst manifestations. For all its commercialism, an Australian Christmas is much more than a forced breather between the final rush of pre-Christmas extravagance and the jostling for bargains at the Boxing Day sales.

Rather, there is, in the effort that goes into selecting just the right gift, a genuine expression of affection that renews the social bond.

As Immanuel Kant put it, making those judgments requires our "imagination to go travelling" into the minds of those to whom we are closest, training us to think with an "enlarged mentality" which can

persist even when the immediate task is done.

For sure, the socks our loved ones have chosen are a recipe for social death, while the book will join last Christmas's offering of Kevin Rudd's autobiography (volume 12: The Kindergarten Years) in its eternal repose on the family shelves; but the gratitude for trying makes it all worthwhile.

And the mere fact of getting together reminds us of how much there is to celebrate.

This year there is that bit more. The Australian and British elections did not merely avert outcomes that seemed profoundly damaging in the first and absolutely catastrophic in the second; they also indicated that after all the chaos, voters want moderate governments that provide respite from the incessant cacophony of recent years.

As the "exhausted majority" replaces the "silent majority", sanity may finally be taking real, if still hesitant and uncertain, steps forward.

Another development too deserves greater recognition than it has received, particularly as Jews prepare to celebrate, as of Sunday, Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, which commemorates the miracle that occurred during the successful rebellion of the Maccabees against Antiochus IV Epiphanes and which remains a symbol of the struggle of the Jewish people against hatred and oppression.

Over the course of the past year, a group of long-time British Labour MPs, some Jewish, several not, chose to end their careers, rather than stand silently by as Jeremy Corbyn led Labour's descent into anti-Semitism.

At a time when politicians are all too often viewed as merely serving their own interests, that group, led by a core of brave women, reminded us of Aristotle's dictum that courage is the very first of the virtues because

without it none of the other virtues can flourish.

These may be mere straws in the wind. There are plenty of trends pointing the other way: the world is never short of causes for dismay.

Wisely, natural selection has made us into moral hypochondriacs, always fearful that we are on the brink of social collapse. And no one could be indifferent to the terrible hardship being inflicted on this continent by drought and fire.

But there are genuine grounds for optimism — and perhaps even for dancing, leaping, piping and drumming our way into 2020. In that spirit of conviction without fanaticism, realism without discouragement, and hope without blindness that marks Australia at its best, a very happy Christmas and a safe, healthy and prosperous new year to all.